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EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT:
A CASE STUDY OF BLIND SOCIAL ACTIVISTS IN HONG KONG

by

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Abstract

This study examined if and how education empowers the blind. In Hong Kong, the education of the blind began with the founding of a home for the blind by the Canossian sisters in 1863 and it has expanded since the 1950's. Meanwhile, a self-help movement of the blind started in Hong Kong in 1964. The movement, launched mainly by a group of educated blind social activists, aimed to change the plight of the blind.

Four activists in the self-help movement were invited for in-depth interviews. In spite of differences in familial and social relationship, they had similar experiences in education, employment and social activism. This study examined the role of schooling in their interpretation of reality and their subsequent collective actions against the oppressive elements of society.

The findings of the study revealed three kinds of barriers arising from blindness. These are the physical, social/attitudinal and institutional barriers which directly and indirectly limited the blind's self-actualization and life chances. These barriers affected their interpretation of reality too. The study investigated the role of education in removing or reducing some of these barriers.

The study focused on schooling experiences, the respondents' schooling experiences, i.e., the objects, events and circumstances they encountered in school. Such objects, events and circumstances are the availability of blindness-specific prerequisites, the kinds of knowledge and values transmitted and interpersonal relations.

The research findings did not suggest a discernible direct causal relationship between education and empowerment. If anything, the education the respondents received was conservative in design, preparing them for inferior roles defined by the biased sighted majority. However, the skills acquired and peer group formation at school became assets in the respondents' struggle for change. The ways the respondents interpreted their reality in school and beyond shaped the extent to which they brought out the transformative potential of education.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

This study focuses on if and how education empowers the blind. In Hong Kong, the education of the blind began with the founding of a home for the blind in 1863 and it has expanded since the 1950's. Meanwhile, a social movement launched by several former students of a school for the blind unfolded in 1964. This study attempts to examine the making and remaking of the social worlds by four blind social activists' interpretation of reality, especially in relation to the influence of schooling on their subsequent participation in the self-help movement of the blind, which aims at improving the social situation of the blind.

The report is divided into two parts. Part one, from chapters 1 to 4, introduces the theoretical and historical background, as well as the research design, of the study. In part two, the schooling process (as recalled by the four blind social activists) and its influence on their subsequent participation in the self-help movement of the blind will be described and analysed in the remaining chapters.

This chapter will start with the depiction of the harsh life of the blind in Hong Kong in the 1950's. Next, it will give a brief account of the development of the education and welfare services for the blind, together with a coincidental

self-help movement of the blind, in Hong Kong. Then, it will outline the perspective of the study, namely the social construction of reality from the symbolic interactionist point of view. Finally, the chapter will end with the rationales and the questions of the research study.

1.1 The substantive problem - the oppressive life of the blind in the early years of post-Second World War Hong Kong

The blind has always been a minority group in most human societies and Hong Kong is no exception. According to the Central Registry for Rehabilitation, the total number of the blind in Hong Kong as at March 1994 is 15195, making up 0.25% of the total population (HKG, 1994, p.1).

In the early 1950's, it was estimated that the population of two and a half million yielded 4744 blind persons in Hong Kong (HKG, 1954, p.5). At that time, the economic status of the blind who were not cared for in any charitable institutions was one of dire poverty (HKG, 1954). They were generally regarded as incapable of participating in the ordinary activities of life. They existed on the fringe of society and were left to live under the following oppressive conditions:

- 1) Abandonment - blind children were associated with superstition and regarded as burden to their families. In an

effort to get rid of them, normally girls, without actually killing them, parents would abandon them in places where they would die undiscovered (Ching, 1982, Ch.2).

2) Dependent life without dignity - other blind people faced the problem of survival and had to depend upon begging for their existence. Life was particularly harsh for the blind girls who could be forced to become concubines or prostitutes (Ching, 1982, Ch.2).

3) Taking up socially defined occupations for the blind - the blind who lived in a better situation could take up such jobs as story-telling, musical entertainment, massage, and fortune-telling (French, 1932). It was thought that the blind could perform these jobs extraordinarily well because blindness could generate compensatory and miraculous power (Jernigan, 1974).

The above-mentioned oppression was socially constructed. Prior to the 1950's, the situation of the blind in Hong Kong was mainly defined by the sighted who held the traditional Chinese attitudes towards the blind and the missionaries who administered two schools for blind girls, which were founded in the last century. It has changed in the past four decades because some newcomers have entered the field of blindness. They are the state bureaucrats, the professionals (e.g. teachers of the blind, orientation and mobility instructors, social workers and medical practitioners) and the activists of

self-help organizations of the blind. The redefining process of the above conditions of the blind by these social participants will be described briefly in the next section and in more detail in chapter 3.

1.2 Context of the study - education, welfare services and self-help movement of the blind in post-Second World War Hong Kong

Prior to the 1950's, "The most important developments in the British Commonwealth were:

- 1) The passing of the Blind Persons Act in 1920, which laid the duty upon local authorities of providing for the welfare of the blind in the areas for which they were responsible.
- 2) The formation of the British Empire Society for the Blind (the later Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind) in 1950, which seeks to co-ordinate the welfare of the blind in all overseas possessions and territories." (HKG, 1954)

Subsequently, the Hong Kong Government developed a planned system of education and welfare for the blind. The following is a brief account of the development of the system and the emergence of the self-help movement of the blind which aims at influencing the syste.

1.2.1 *Expansion of education for the blind*

The education of the blind began with a school for blind children opened in Paris in 1784. The Nineteenth Century saw the introduction of the institutions for the welfare of the blind throughout the Western world. Concern for the protection of blind girls prompted the establishment of missionary schools for the blind in Hong Kong (HKG, 1954).

The education of the blind in Hong Kong dates back to the Honeyville Home for the Blind [1] which was started in 1863 as part of the Canossian Institute, when the Canossian Sisters, having come from Italy, started their charitable work in Hong Kong. The Ebenezer Home for the Blind was founded by the Hildersheim (Lutheran) Mission from Germany in 1897 and commenced with five blind girls (HKG, 1954).

Until the 1950's, blind boys were admitted to the Ebenezer School for the Blind. Meanwhile, the Government started to support and give financial assistance to the schools for the blind, which were registered under the Education Ordinance in 1954. In 1960, the Special Education Section was set up within the Education Department. Thus, the education of the blind officially became a sub-system of the education system. From then on, teachers of the blind had to be trained and they were paid higher than the regular education teachers. Braille textbooks were provided by the Government Printing Department and Hong Kong Society for the

Blind (HKSB).[2] These laid the foundation for further development of the education of the blind in Hong Kong, including the integrated education for the blind, special class for the partially sighted, the training of the mentally retarded blind and adult education for the blind (HKG, 1991).

1.2.2 Provision of services for the blind

During the 1950's, the Government also began to tackle the problems encountered by the blind. In 1953, a working group was set up to study the problems of the blind and a report was submitted to the Social Welfare Advisory Committee the following year. It was reported that only 250 blind persons were cared for in the charitable institutions and no effective organization existed to rehabilitate, educate or train them to regain economic self-sufficiency. One of the recommendations of the working group was to set up a statutory body for the prevention of blindness and the rehabilitation, education, training and placing in gainful employment of persons blinded in Hong Kong (HKG, 1954). Hence, HKSB was established in 1956 to provide a variety of new services, including braille book production, vocational training, provision of jobs and hostel places (HKSB, 1993). At the same time, social welfare services for the blind (such as establishing welfare centre for the blind) started to expand in the 1960's.

To cater for the need of the blind for social and recreational activities, the Lutheran Centre for the Blind and the Ning Kwong Bradbury Centre for the Blind were founded by the Lutheran Church and the Pentecostal Holiness Church in 1968 and 1973 respectively. Meanwhile, the Government introduced the Public Assistance Scheme in 1971 and the Disability Allowance and Old Age Allowance Schemes in 1973, under which the poor, the disabled and the elderly can apply for financial assistance (HKG, 1977A). That is to say, from then on, the blind can take part in an alternative form of social activities organized by the religious bodies and they can live on a new form of financial support provided by the Government.

In 1977, a White Paper on Rehabilitation entitled "A United Effort: Integrating the Disabled into the Community" was published. Since then, the services for the blind have been co-ordinated by the Rehabilitation Development Co-ordinating Committee of the Government as recommended in the White Paper.[3] Hence, non-government organizations and the individuals concerned (including blind activists) are to be appointed to sit on the Committee to give advice on the policies and services concerning the blind.

1.2.3 Self-help movement of the blind

In the early 1960's, the graduates of the schools for the

blind had been well equipped to become wage labourers. Some became telephone operators and several of them even went abroad for further studies. Their self-awareness had been raised. They had a new interpretation of who they were and where they ought to go. They wanted to strive for equal opportunity and full participation in society, so they founded their own organization, Hong Kong Blind Friends' Club (HKBFC)[4] in 1964 (HKAB, 1979). Another self-help organization of the blind, Hong Kong Federation of the Blind (HKFB), was also set up in 1972 by a group of older and less-educated blind people (Foo, 1985).

Alongside the unfolding of the self-help movement of the blind in the 1960's, the education and services for the blind have been expanding since then. The blind activists always give criticisms on government policies regarding the blind and launch innovative projects, such as the integrated education programme, braille dictionary production and adult education courses, to mention but a few.

This study is an attempt to analyse the changing interpretation of reality by the blind activists themselves and their reactions to the social discrimination against the blind throughout their life span. My focal point is whether and how schooling process and schooling experience have affected the interpretation and actions of the blind in their

everyday life.

1.3 Perspective of the study - interpretation of reality

In examining the redefinition process of blindness by the blind social activists under the influence of education, the perspective adopted in this study is one of the sociology of education in the light of the social construction of reality. According to Berger and Luckmann (1971, p.13), the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which the social construction of reality occurs. "Reality" is defined as "A quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition", and "Knowledge" is defined as "The certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics". The analysis of the social construction of reality is concerned with the development, transmission and maintenance of all human "Knowledge" in social situations (Berger & Luckmann, 1971, p.15).

Berger and Luckmann's view of the nature of social reality is the modification of the Durkheimian theory of society by introducing a dialectical perspective derived from Marx and emphasizing the constitution of social reality through subjective meanings derived from Weber. Their analysis of the internalisation of social reality are greatly influenced by George Herbert Mead and some developments of his

work by the Symbolic-interactionist School. Thus, Durkheim's idea of "Social facts as things" and Weber's view of "The object of cognition as the subjective meaning with complex of action" are not contradictory. Society possess objective facticity. And society is built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning. The task of sociology of knowledge is to study how it is possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities (Berger & Luckmann, 1971, pp.28-30).

This study will be based on the above perspective put forward by Berger and Luckmann and the symbolic interactionists. Thus, the complex process of the translation of the subjective interpretation of blindness by the blind into their self-help movement will be investigated. My focal point is to see whether and how education has played a role in this process. Therefore, their interpretation of blindness, the formation of their own organization and their strategies to achieve their goals in connection with their educational experiences will be explored.

1.4 Rationales

Primarily, it involves my values. As a blind person, I am concerned with the empowerment of the blind to achieve the goals of equality, independence and self-actualization. To go one step further, my research question is prompted by a wish to debunk certain myths of blindness (e.g. blindness as total

tragedy, blindness as compensatory/miraculous power, blindness as dehumanisation). As a graduate of the Ebenezer School for the Blind in 1975, I would also like to know more about the education of the blind in the 1950's and the 1960's when the integrated education programme had not been introduced.

Theoretically, this research will enrich the literature on the study of the relationship between education and empowerment. To be exact, the study aims at reflecting the influence of the education of the blind in a special school on their attitudinal and behavioural change. This will throw light on the great debate on whether education improves or reproduces the situation of an individual with a socially disadvantaged background.

Empirically, the study will be an analysis of the life worlds of the educated blind in Hong Kong during the post-war years. This is a unique experience in view of their minority group status in a society dominated by their sighted counterparts, as well as Hong Kong's special position as a Chinese society under British rule. Therefore, it will add information to the study of the education and empowerment of the blind.

1.5 Research questions

The study is to investigate if and how education has affected the participation of blind social activists in their self-help movement. To do so, the schooling of blind social activists will be traced. The analysis will begin with their interpretation of reality during pre-school years. The possible factors to be investigated include the year of onset of blindness, family background, parental care, sibling relationship, games and playmates.

Then the personal reflections of the selected interviewees on many aspects of the schooling process will be examined. These aspects which may change their interpretation of reality include the philosophies and practices of the school, the structure and personnel of the school, the reaction of the blind students to the school environment, their sub-culture, the school social interaction, and their evaluation of each of these aspects.

Finally, the possible schooling influence on their interpretation of blindness and their actions to remake their reality will be examined. I will analyse the "World of meanings" of the blind social activists under study. Here they are active agents who interpret what they do and the world they are in. And these interpretations shape their actions (or inactions) in their given situations (Berger & Luckmann, 1971). Thus, I want to study the process of

empowerment of the blind social activists (If any) as it unfolded. This is why I have conducted a qualitative research.

Education is regarded as a possible transformative process, not only because it may equip the blind with knowledge and skills as prospective workers in the labour market, but also because it may affect their interpretation of reality. Thus, the study mainly examines if and how education has changed the blind social activists' interpretation of the social conditions of the blind. The whole issue will be studied under the debate on the role of education in empowering an individual.

Notes

1. The Canossian Daughters of Charity began to work for the welfare of the blind since 1863. The school took root in the old house of Honeyville in Mt. Davies Road. When the school moved to St. Francis Street, Wanchai, in 1960, it was registered in the Education Department under the name of "Canossa School for Blind Girls", it was a subsidised school for special education. In 1968, the school took the name of "Canossa School for the Visually Disabled" and it became a co-educational school in 1974. Due to the fact that the Government wanted to save economic resources, now that there were enough special school places for the blind, the school closed down in 1986. For more information, see the Special Issue of Canossa School for the Visually Disabled published in 1983.

2. The braille production work was transferred to the Centralised Braille Production Centre managed by the Hong Kong Society for the Blind in the mid-1986, see Commissioner for Rehabilitation's First Report: May 1984-December 1985 (Including 1985 Rehabilitation Programme Plan), Commissioner for Rehabilitation's Office, December 1985.

3. The Rehabilitation Co-ordinating Committee took the name of the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee in 1995, see White Paper on Rehabilitation - Equal Opportunities and Full Participation: A Better Tomorrow for All (Hong Kong Government, 1995).

4. In 1974 "Hong Kong Blind Friends' Club" renamed "Hong Kong Association of the Blind", which further renamed "Hong Kong Blind Union" in 1995.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical context of the study: Interpretation of reality and the role of education in empowerment

In this chapter, a theoretical framework for the study will be set up under the sociology of education. In the first section, the literature related to interpretation of reality from the perspective of symbolic interactionism will be introduced. Then, in the second and third sections, the discussion will focus on the concept of empowerment and the role of education in helping students to live a fuller and richer life, namely if and how they are empowered by education to take individual and collective actions against the oppressive elements of reality. Finally, in the last section, the effectiveness of various forms of schooling for the blind will be evaluated in the light of empowerment.

2.1 Interpretation of reality

In order to understand whether and how education has empowered the blind social activists under study, it is worthwhile to use the analytical framework of symbolic interactionism, which explores men's interpretation of reality and their relationship with the physical environment, with other people, and with the social institutions. To begin

with, Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* (1971) will be introduced so as to have a general picture of the dialectical relationship between subjective reality and objective reality. Then the significance of meanings involved in the interpretation of reality will be described. This approach stresses the way in which social reality is a creation of social participants, and that social categories and social knowledge are not given or natural, but are socially constructed - a product of conscious communications and action between people (Tomlinson, 1982, p.19).

2.1.1 *The social construction of reality*

According to Berger and Luckmann (1971), "Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world", which "Originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these". This reality can be taken as the object of analysis (Berger & Luckmann, 1971, p.33).

Berger and Luckmann regard society as both objective and subjective reality. Objective reality has come into existence through institutionalization and legitimation of human activities. Institutions (e.g. schools and families), roles (e.g. teachers and students) and symbols (e.g. languages and signs) are objectifications of subjective reality. Social interaction among human beings are guided by these

objectivated objects.

On the opposite side of the same coin, the subjective reality of an individual is internalized through primary and secondary socialization by which the life world of an individual is moulded by subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. The individual's subjectivity consists of his typification of the objects circumscribed in his world. The frame of reference in the process of typification includes system of relevance, interest at hand, his role and status with the social system and knowledge at hand. Intersubjectivity occurs through the reciprocity of perspectives among people, socialization and the distribution of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1971, ch.1).

From the above, "Society is a human product, society is an objective reality and man is a social product" (Berger & Luckmann, 1971, p.79). Hence, an analysis of the social world of the blind must not leave out any one of these three moments, each of which corresponds to an essential characterization of the social world, although interpretation of reality by the blind will be the focus of the study.

2.1.2 Meanings and interpretation of reality

In this sub-section, I am going to discuss the importance

of "Meanings" in the interpretation of reality. Blumer (1969) puts forth the following three premises of symbolic interactionism to elucidate the significance of meanings:

1) "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them." Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world - physical objects, other human beings, categories of human beings, institutions, guiding ideals and activities of others. the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right. Therefore, to understand the formation of one's empowered action, the meaning of the things toward which he acts is more important than factors alleged to produce the action.

2) "The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows." That is to say, meaning does not emanate from the intrinsic makeup of the thing that has meaning, nor it does not arise through a coalescence of psychological elements in the person. Instead, meaning arises in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person, thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through

the defining activities of people as they interact. From this premise, the meaning of blindness is not simply the loss of sight. Rather, it is defined in the process of interaction between people, be they blind or sighted.

3) "These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters." The use of meanings by the actor occurs through a process of interpretation. This process has two steps. First, the actor indicates to himself the things towards which he is acting; he has to point out himself the things that have meaning. The making of such indications is an internalized social process in that the actor is interacting with himself. This interaction with himself is an instant of the person engaging in a process of communication with himself. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. Accordingly, interpretation is a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action through a process of self-interaction.

With the above premises, The perspective of the study

sees blind activists as people engaged in living. Such living is a process of ongoing activity in which they are developing lines of action in the multitudinous situations they encounter. They are caught up in a vast process of interaction in which they have to fit their developing actions to one another. This process of interaction consists in making indications to others of what to do and in interpreting the indications as made by others. They live in words of objects and guided in their orientation and action by the meaning of those objects. Their objects, including objects of themselves, are formed, sustained, weakened, and transformed in their interaction with one another.

There are some studies which have been carried out from interpretative perspectives, but usually from the point of view of the handicapped in society generally, rather than applied in education particularly. Scott (1970), using Goffman's notion of stigma, discussed the treatment of the handicapped by professionals. Dexter (1958) questioned the "Social problem" approach to mental deficiency. Barton (1973) applied Goffman's notion of "Total institution" to a study of the "Institutionalized mind". Given that we know very little about the workings and functions of a school for the blind - teacher-students interaction and negotiation, transmission of knowledge, the "Knowledge" deemed to be suitable, and the treatment and experiences of students and their parents -

there are a variety of questions that could form the basis for research and study from interactionist perspectives. The three premises cited above constitute the framework of the study. This perspective sees the blind as a distinct human group living in an oppressive situation which is socially constructed. The study is to investigate whether and how education, including school social interaction, has changed the interpretation of reality by the blind. Thus, it is an attempt to see the participation of the blind activists in the self-help movement of the blind as being formed through a process of designation and interpretation of reality during schooling.

2.2 Empowerment and interpretation of reality

In analysing the situation of the oppressed, Paulo Freire has the assumption that "Man's ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively" (Freire, 1972, p.12). "Man's ontological vocation" is not without hindrance. Man must have reflection on and actions against barriers at many levels of society. To do so, man has to be empowered.

C. Fletcher defines empowerment as a process by which one increasingly take greater charge of oneself and one's life. The building blocks for empowerment are: Skills, information,

beliefs, goals and values (Fletcher, 1989). Omvig (1994) believes that education can provide the blind with such building blocks. He considers that "A school may be said to empower the blind student to the extent that he or she is equipped with the tools - the knowledge, skills, motivation, and self-confidence - which are necessary to enable him or her to take charge and to make sound judgements and decisions based upon fact, skill, and ability so that the student can be the best adult which he or she is capable of becoming" (Omvig, 1994).

Empowered individuals believe that their actions make a difference, that they "can have an impact upon an outcome" (Schorr & Rodin, 1982, p.160). Empowerment is thus a process of enhancing beliefs about personal control (Greenberger, Strasser, & Lee, 1988) that occurs, in large part, through communication relationships, and social experiences. Empowering interactions and relationships strengthen people's sense of control by increasing their sense of task efficacy and by providing the resources they need to accomplish tasks.

G. M. Johnson (1995) finds out that "The more educated employees, regardless of their visual status, gave and received trust and resources more readily, saw more of their relationships as empowering, and were seen as empowering by others."

Therefore, education may provide an opportunity for the blind to obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to succeed in their chosen areas of pursuit. However, whether education has empowered the blind is ultimately determined by their ability to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. Thus, In this study, empowerment is analysed in terms of interpretation of reality through social activism. Though empowerment is not measured by input and process standards in education (i.e. "What is taught," "How it is taught," "Why it is taught"), it is an attempt to see the effects of education on empowerment.

2.3 The role of education in empowerment

According to Giroux (1983), there are three theories explaining the function of schooling. The first is the liberal theory which emphasizes the developmental aspect of schooling. The second is the reproduction theory which argues that education perpetuates the privileges of the dominant class. The third theory stresses the importance of the oppositional behaviour of the human agents in the schools as a transformative force. The following presents the views of these theories on the role of education in empowering an individual.

2.3.1 *The liberal theories of education*

The following three goals are pursued by the traditional liberal theorists of education (Dewey, 1966). First, education should be egalitarian in the sense of acting as an effective force for overcoming the natural, social and historical inequities that tend inexorably to arise in society. Second, education should be developmental in the sense of providing students with the means to develop the cognitive, physical, emotional, critical, and aesthetic powers they possess as individuals and as human beings. Third, education should promote the smooth integration of individuals as fully functioning members of society. In short, the liberal theorists of education claim that universal education offers possibilities for individual development, social mobility, and political and economic power to the disadvantaged and dispossessed. Most important of all, education is an enabling force which can empower an individual as an active agent to construct his reality.

After the Second World War, many scholars believed that education can provide a means for everyone to climb the social ladder by merit. Education can become the essence of a meritocracy. As Michael Young (1961, p.837) says, in a meritocratic society, the only ladder that matters is the educational one. This optimism about education's ability had faded in the 1970's. Many had begun to question education's ability to contribute to develop an individual; in some

cases, scholars have argued that education has aggravated preexisting problems rather than contributed to their solutions.

For example, A. H. Halsey (1977), in his longitudinal study of the education in Britain, concludes that "The direct effect of the class hierarchy of families on educational opportunity and certification has risen since the war." In other words, the expansion of education cannot assure the attainment of an egalitarian society and merit alone cannot assure the underprivileged to have a better tomorrow. In the next sub-section, the reproduction theory of education, which views that schools reinforce rather than improve the situation of the oppressed, will be discussed.

2.3.2 Schooling and theories of reproduction

The most undermining challenge to the liberal theory of education has come from neo-Marxists. They disagree that schools is the major mechanism for the creation of a meritocratic and egalitarian society. They have included education in their critique of current social inequality. According to Henry Giroux (1983), there are three camps of reproduction theorists who consider that schools are portrayed as reproductive in economic, cultural and political senses as described below:

First, economic-reproduction model was developed primarily around the work of Bowles and Gintis. Its focuses are on the relationship between schooling and society and on how subjectivities actually get constituted in school. They generally agree on the relationship between power and domination, on the one hand, and the relationship between schooling and the economy on the other. They contend that education has served mainly the interests of those in power and has perpetuated the inequalities of the social system. They all agree that schools in capitalist societies reflect the values and interests of the upper and middle classes and operate to the disadvantage of the working class. Schools reinforce and reproduce the class structure of capitalist society by producing a docile and compliant workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 1977).

Second, theories of cultural reproduction are also concerned with the question of how capitalist societies are able to reproduce themselves. These theories link culture, class, and domination. The mediating role of culture in reproducing class societies is more worthy of noting than the source and consequences of economic inequality. The work of Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues represents the most important perspective for studying the cultural-reproductive model. Empirical research in France by Pierre Bourdieu has shown that schools provide the dominant classes with "Cultural

and material capital" which enables them to participate more fully in the social system and its rewards (Bourdieu, 1973).

Third, schools are viewed by hegemonic-state reproductive model as part of a state apparatus that produce and legitimate the economic and ideological imperatives that underline the state's political power. Marxist theorists have argued that understanding the role of the state is central to any analysis of how domination operates. Thus, a major concern among a number of educational theorists focuses on the complex role of state intervention in the educational system. According to this model, the failure of education to completely resolve problems of social inequality is due not so much to education per se but to its place in capitalist economies. Education, as a tool of the capitalist state, operates to maintain the status quo, enabling those in power to reinforce their privileged position and deprives those not in power, either by socialization into a passive role or by depriving them of the necessary cultural capital, from launching a challenge to the capitalist hierarchy.

According to the reproduction theories, an individual is more influenced by the determinants arising from the social structure than by schooling. They show how a suppressed class is created through education. However, the resistance theories, as examined in the next sub-section, attempt to

develop an alternative liberating perspective and an alternative cultural basis for meaning and personal identity.

2.3.3 *Schooling and theories of resistance*

The resistance theories emphasizes the importance of the oppositional behaviour of the human agents in the schools as a transformative force. It began with some ethnographic studies which aimed to understand the oppositional behaviours in schools. For instance, Paul Willis's "Learning to Labour" (1977) has demonstrated that the oppositional behaviour of the working-class children is a resistance to the dominant culture. The students in Michelle Fine's study of drop outs in New York City display the self-formation which accommodates the dominant culture (Fine, 1982). Besides, Angela McRobbie's account of six-formth female students in England asserts that oppositional behaviour is simply played out as an expression of dominant ideology.

Giroux (1983) claims that the mechanisms of reproduction are never complete and are always faced with partially realized elements of opposition. Usually, human agency accommodates, mediates, and resists the logic of capital and its dominating social practices. The resistance theory of education also attempts to link social structures and human agency in a dialectical manner. Moreover, curriculum is seen as not only serving the interests of domination but also

containing aspects which provide emancipatory possibilities.

The resistance theory represents a new theoretical framework for understanding the process of schooling which places educational knowledge, values, and social relation within the context of antagonistic relations and examines them within interplay of dominant and subordinate school culture. The resistance theory is particularly useful in this study, because it can help the understanding of the possibility of blind activists as active agents in making and remaking their realities as a result of schooling.

2.4 Education and empowerment of the blind

In the last section of this chapter, some views on special education will be introduced first. Then, some forms of and approaches to the schooling for the blind will be presented. Finally, the importance of education in empowering the blind will be explained.

2.4.1 *Special education*

Special education is viewed by the common people as "Education of the blind, deaf-mutes, people low in intelligence or having physical defects" (CHEC, 1983). According to James E. Ysseldyke (1984), "Special education is a sub-system of regular education one of many ways in

which educational experiences are provided for students who do not profit from regular education". Thus, it appears that special education is isolated from regular education for the benefit of students with special educational needs.

However, Tomlinson (1981, p.45) points out that "The social origins of state special education can certainly be traced to the desire of educators in normal schools to separate out the defective and the troublesome, and the special education can be regarded as a safety valve, allowing the smoother development of the normal education system." In this sense, it is doubtful whether students with special educational needs can be empowered by special education. To remedy this, special education has been modified into different kinds of school placement.

2.4.2 *Segregated and integrated education*

As regards school placement of the blind, there are two widely differing plans for the education of blind children. On the one hand, there are special residential schools for the blind and, on the other side, there is the integrated system of education for the blind, wherein the blind child receives education in a regular school alongside his sighted peers. The effects of the education in a special residential school on the blind activists under study will be presented and analysed in chapters seven and nine. The integrated education

programme is divided into two major categories - social integration at school level and curricular integration (Tamboli, 1985).

Integrated education for the blind is an educational goal and a description of various educational procedures - ranging from occasional functions where blind and sighted children are brought together for social mixing, to the intended complete assimilation of blind students into a sighted teaching milieu (Tamboli, 1985). There are differences between the approaches of integrated education to facilitate their participation in regular education settings and to improve their interaction with peers.

The first dimension is to do with deployment of resources - financial, technical, and human. Brohier (1989), through his analysis of the education of the blind in some countries, thought that it is necessary to increase the competitiveness of the blind students by providing them with sufficient personnel and equipment. Thus, in his view, the equalization of educational opportunities means the "Availability of the necessary support staff and equipment to allow the blind to learn at the same level as the other children". That is to say, "Unequal but equitable" educational resources should be allocated to the blind in order to achieve "Self-actualization" and "Equal opportunity" (HKG, 1982).

Another dimension is an ecological one. Bishop (1990) considers that access to the best education for blind children is as important as making the actual physical environment barrier-free. Some of the toughest barriers to break down are not physical at all, but relics of policy that confine and prohibit blind persons from reaching their potential in the socioeconomic sphere. A healthy balance can be reached by carefully assessing both the environment and the specific needs of the student.

A third dimension concerns blind pupils' sense of identification with the school or sighted pupils for whom the blind are integrated, together with a sense of responsibility or "Ownership" that the staff involved feel toward the blind. This dimension stresses those blind people who are raised "To be passive, sheltered, and dependent". These traits, if not properly dealt with, are easily "Reinforced by teachers and guidance counselors" (Koestler, 1983).

2.4.3 Empowerment and education of the blind

According to Omvig (1994), blind people should be empowered by education so that the limitations arising from blindness can be overcome and they can be the best adults which they are capable of becoming. Lowenfeld points out that blindness is a cause of limitations, a loss or serious impairment of vision. It demands adjustment because the blind

individual must live in a society in which sight plays a dominant role (Lowenfeld, 1981, p.227). In order to reduce its handicapping effects, education is an important means of adjustment. The success is basically dependent upon the strengths of each individual (Lowenfeld, 1981, p.227).

Ozoji's theoretical framework of the model for an educational system for blind students is based on the belief that a visual impairment creates special needs in an individual. These needs should be met if the individual is to maximize his or her potential in life. Because these needs differ according to individuals, identification and assessment must be recognized. Since these needs are better met when input is made within the framework of the home and/or the regular school, the principles of normalization are incorporated into the framework (Ozoji, 1991).

In analysing the situation of the blind, Pfeiffer (1992, p.53) concludes that "Blind people are devalued and treated in an oppressive way. They tend to internalize that oppression and feel guilty for it. They then begin to act in a way which legitimizes the oppression and the cycle continues". Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1988) further elaborates this by introducing the concepts of "Personal blindness" and "Social blindness". The former refers to one's internalized reaction to the lack of sight - the sense of loss, of shame, of frustration over

logistical difficulties, whereas the latter is concerned with society's often stereotypical attitudes regarding blind people. Hence, personal blindness and social blindness reinforce one another. Can the blind be liberated from this oppressive cycle?

Lowenfeld (1981) and Omvig (1994) find the solution in education. Lowenfeld (1981, p.29) thought that "Education must aim at giving the blind child a knowledge of the realities around him, the confidence to cope with these realities, and the feeling that he is recognized as accepted as an individual in his own right". There are three interrelated factors in his formulation: Knowledge of the reality is presented through special teaching methods; blindness as an emotional factor is taken into account when a blind child cope with the reality confidently; and the importance of a blind child's own sociability as well as the readiness and willingness of his environment to accept him (Lowenfeld, 1981, p.29).

Omvig (1994) contends that the blind can be empowered by education. In his view, empowerment means an equal education, to equip blind students with those alternative skills to function competently in a predominantly sighted world, adjustment of the blind to their blindness, and development of feelings of adequacy and self-confidence.

From the above, education should empower the blind to be capable of overcoming their personal blindness and social blindness. The study investigates if and how education has empowered the blind with regard to the self-help movement of the blind which is a series of actions against social blindness.

This chapter has provided a theoretical framework based on symbolic interactionism and the main concepts of the study, namely social construction of reality, education and empowerment. The next chapter will give the socio-historical context of the study.

Chapter 3

Historical background of the study: Education and self-help movement of the blind in Hong Kong

After the introduction of the theoretical framework of the study, this chapter turns our attention to the historical development of the education and the self-help movement of the blind in Hong Kong. The first section will give an account of the development of the education of the blind in Hong Kong with reference to the social participants in this arena. Then, the focus will be shifted to a unique group of these social participants, namely the blind activists, who launched the self-help movement of the blind in Hong Kong since 1964. Most of them are former students of a school for the blind and they are dedicated to improving the plight of the blind. This chapter provides the fundamental background for this study.

3.1 The development of the education of the blind in Hong Kong

3.1.1 Introduction

Educational expansion is a global phenomenon (Boli & Ramirez, 1986) and there is no exception for the education of the blind. The first school for blind children was opened in Paris, France, in 1784 and the 19th Century saw the

establishment of other schools for the blind throughout the Western countries (Lowenfeld, 1981, p.11). Since the mid-Nineteenth Century, there were orphanage and schools for the blind in China and Hong Kong sponsored by religious organizations from other countries (Vaughan, 1992; Huang, 1992; HKG, 1954).

Since the Canossian Daughters of Charity began to work for the welfare of the blind in 1863, Hong Kong has experienced a significant educational expansion for the blind in terms of the coverage of students with visual impairment and educational effectiveness. In the beginning, only blind girls were admitted to the schools for the blind. However, from 1950's on, the categories of students with visual impairment have been extended to cover blind boys in 1953, the partially sighted in 1972 and the mentally retarded blind in 1977 (HKG, 1991). Regarding the educational outcomes, some blind people have gained upward social mobility after schooling in the past few decades but it was a forlorn dream for the female graduates of the early schools for the blind in Hong Kong (ESHB, 1992).

While the emergence of educational institutions for the blind is a global phenomenon, the developmental process is different from country to country. For instance, Lowenfeld (1981, p.7) attributes three forces to the residential school

development in the United States, namely the increasing integration of the blind into society, the supremacy of public school education, the recognition of the importance of the family life for the individual child. The educational development for the blind in Hong Kong has undergone a different process, which was started by the missionaries and later joined by the Government and non-government organizations. In order to analyse this process, I will examine the social participants in the arena of the education of the blind at different stages.

The education of the blind in Hong Kong began with missionary organizations. There followed in time the state intervention, first to support voluntary effort through subvention, and finally, to create a framework in which the Government and voluntary agencies could work in partnership to see that all children with visual problems receive education in different settings. The framework reached its present form only in the mid-1970's. Hence, the role of the Government in this arena is regarded as significant, because it has brought about institutional change since the mid-1950's and it is also the main source of financial support to make the present form of system work. In other words, the Government has influence on the orientation and quality of the education of the blind. Thus, the following discussion is divided into two stages - the pre-Government intervention stage and the Government

intervention stage.

3.1.2 Missionary as sole provider of education for blind girls (1863-1953)

Hong Kong became the British colony in 1842 and thereafter the missionaries had room for their religious, charitable and educational activities (Morris, 1990). During this period, the Hong Kong Government did not actively involve itself in charity and it provided limited education.

Though under British rule, Hong Kong was still a Chinese society. The local Chinese had their village system, neighbourhood organizations and clansmen associations to help the needy. However, Chinese philanthropists usually extended their support to the able-bodied rather than the disabled poor (HKG, 1954, p.6). Another characteristic of the traditional Chinese society is the primacy in providing the male heir (Pearson, 1990). In time of hardship, girls were abandoned. Hence, the missionaries filled the charity gap left by the above-mentioned values of traditional Chinese society.[1]

The Honeyville Home for the Blind [2] was started by the Canossian Sisters in 1863 and the Ebenezer School and Home for the Blind (the Ebenezer) was founded by the Hildersheim (Lutheran) Mission in 1897. The chief aim of the two homes was to give protection to blind girls. Some education was

given in segregated boarding environment which was neither adapted from nor part of the mainstream education system. The blind female students could learn braille, handicraft, music and religious knowledge as well as some elementary textbook knowledge. It is a shelter for the whole lives of some of them when they could not get married.

During this period, only two groups of social participants in the arena of the education of the blind are worth noting. They are the missionaries and the blind girls.

Both the Canossian Daughters of Charity and the Hildersheim Mission had their mother organs in Italy and Germany respectively. Similarly, both of the organs sent female missionaries to Hong Kong to manage the schools for blind girls. Basically, the missionaries had to rely on the support and obey the instructions from their European Orders although they could make suggestions. Sister Luise Cooper was requested by Rev. Wong Yuk Choh of the Chinese Rhenish Church, who was lamenting the suffering of blind Chinese girls, to establish the Ebenezer. Before putting it into practice, she had to return to Germany to seek for permission and support.

During this period, blind people in Hong Kong were associated with superstition and regarded as burden to their families. They faced problem of survival. Some of them

earned their living by being street musicians, fortune tellers, hawkers, minstrels or beggars (HKG, 1954). Life was particularly harsh for the blind girls who could be abandoned by their parents or forced to become prostitutes or concubines. Concern for the protection of blind girls prompted the establishment of the above two institutions. The graduates of the early schools for blind girls could work in the schools or in other church organizations. However, they suffered from the twin disabilities of a visual handicap and social handicap of being a woman. It is difficult for them to live independently in society. As for the rest of the blind, they had no educational opportunities and they lived under the oppressive conditions mentioned in chapter 1.

3.1.3 *Government intervention with co-ordinating mechanism (1954-)*

In the early 1950's, Hong Kong had a need to change. The population had grown from 600,000 in 1946 to 1.8 million in 1950 (Morris, 1990). A large inflow of capital also came from China. To adapt the new labour market and solve the new social problems, the Government had to formulate new policies, including those relating to the blind.

In April 1953, the Sub-committee on Welfare of the Blind was formed under the Social Welfare Advisory Committee "To advise on all problems of a social nature relating to the

welfare and education of the blind". In 1954, the Sub-committee submitted a report entitled "Blindness in Hong Kong" to the Committee. As recommended in the report, a society for the blind was an urgent necessity in Hong Kong with two primary objectives: The prevention of blindness; the rehabilitation, education, training and placing in gainful employment of the blind.

As a result, a statutory body called Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB) was set up in 1956. The Education Department also set up Special Education Section in 1960. From then on, the schools for the blind were monitored and funded by the Education Department. Thus, the education of the blind officially became a sub-system of the education system. Blind boys began to be enrolled in the schools for the blind. Teachers of the blind had to be trained and they were paid higher than the regular education teachers. Braille textbooks were provided by the Government Printing Department and HKSB.[3] These laid the foundation for further development of the education of the blind in Hong Kong, including the integrated education for the blind, special class for the partially sighted, the training of the mentally retarded blind and adult education for the blind (HKG, 1991). In 1977, the Education and Personnel Sub-committee was formed under the Rehabilitation Development Co-ordinating Committee (the present Rehabilitation Advisory Committee) to formulate

the educational policies and to co-ordinate the educational services for the blind.

The following is a description of the social structure and social participants of the education of the blind since 1950's. The social structure of the education of the blind can be divided into two component parts - special education and integrated education.

1) Special education: This component part is subdivided into special schools for the blind, special classes for the partially sighted, the training centre for the mentally retarded blind, and the adult education/vocational training for the visually impaired.

Owing to the small number of blind students and over-supply of special school places, The Canossian School for the Visually Disabled closed down in 1986. Since then, the Ebenezer is the only existing school for the blind in Hong Kong. It has to observe the Code of Aid for Special Education. It generally follows the model of ordinary schools in setting their curriculum. The subjects being taught include Chinese, English, Mathematics, History, Domestic Science, Orientation and Mobility (O&M), etc.. Science subjects were gradually cut. This reflects a decision by educators that blind students would only benefit from

non-science education. Students start from kindergarten through six years of primary school and three years of secondary school.

Another form of special education was also introduced in the late 1960's. This is the special class for partially sighted students in ordinary school. They need supportive services as blind students in special schools. There are special classes in Li Cheng Uk Government Primary School (AM session) and the Queen Elizabeth School. A full stream of classes ranging from Primary 1 to Form 3 are provided, except during years when the demand in certain levels falls below 50 per cent, in which case combined classes will be opened. The provision of special class for the partially sighted can be regarded as a by-product of the compulsory education because the Government has the responsibility of taking care of the needs of the partially sighted in ordinary schools.

By the same token, Pokfulam Training Centre was set up in 1977 to provide basic education and boarding facilities to the mentally retarded blind. It can also be regarded as a response to the increasing number of students with multiple handicaps.

From the early 1980's on, the Adult Education Section of the Education Department has subvented voluntary organizations

to run adult education courses for the blind. At the same time, the Vocational Training Council and the Employees' Retraining Board also run courses for the blind (HKG, 1995).

2) Integrated education:

Integrated education for students with visual impairment occurs in ordinary secondary schools and tertiary education institutes. It can date back to the first half of this Century. The Ebenezer sent its students to other missionary schools and seminaries. In the 1950's, though without resource help from the Government, at least two blind persons, Lucy Ching and Irene Ip, completed secondary education in an ordinary school (Ching, 1982).

In the 1960's, some blind activists were concerned with the limited opportunities of the blind in education and realised that segregated education only solved part of their problem. First of all, blind people could not study further than Form 3 after graduation from the special schools. Secondly, blind adults who had not received any education in their teens would not have the opportunity to learn. Thirdly, blind people graduated from special schools needed a period of time to adapt to the society. In 1967, in view of the absence of services for blind adults who wished to pursue further studies, the Hong Kong Blind Friends' Club (HKBFC) initiated supportive educational services. At the start, it responded

to requests for assistance from motivated blind adults by persuading principals of ordinary schools to accept them, lending to the students necessary equipment and recruiting volunteers to provide reading and other services to the students. One of the schools which accepted blind people on the basis that supportive educational services were being provided by HKBFC was the Caritas Commercial School (HKAB, 1979).

On the other hand, given the individual examples of Lucy Ching and Irene Ip in the 1950's, the Canossa School for the Visually Disabled initiated an integrated education programme in several catholic schools. The Ebenezer followed suit in 1970. This programme was formally supported by the Government in 1979.

As regards the integrated education in ordinary schools, resource help is provided for blind and partially sighted students. They receive education in special schools or special classes up to the level of Form 3. Those who are considered academically suited to pursuing their studies to Form 5 and university entrance level are integrated into ordinary schools and at the same time enrolled in the Ebenezer for resource help, e.g. assistance in the preparation of supplementary teaching materials, including braille books, braille notes, tapes, embossed maps and diagrams.

To ensure that integration is effective, resource teachers work closely with teachers of the school in which visually impaired students are integrated. These resource teachers are based in the Ebenezer so that they can benefit from the experience of the teachers there and make use of the special facilities. In the respect of resource help to visually impaired students pursuing tertiary education, resource help to them in the universities is provided through the students affairs office. Visually impaired students enrolled in technical institutes may be provided with remedial classes on selective subjects. (HKG, 1991, Ch.5)

The social participants in the arena of the education of the visually impaired in this period include teachers of the visually impaired, regular education teachers, school administrators, Government bureaucrats, blind activists, O&M instructors, social workers and rehabilitation workers. They work in specific areas but their interests are co-ordinated through the Special School Council and the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee.

This is the period when education for the blind has experienced the fastest development. The idea of integration has been taken on. Graduates of the special schools and special classes are integrated into ordinary schools. They

are given the opportunity to complete secondary and tertiary education.

From the above, we can see that changes in the form, organization and provision of the education of the blind in Hong Kong are not the result of mysterious processes of evolution, nor are they benevolent adaptations to new social requirements. Change happens because certain people want it to happen and can impose their views and goals on others. As the subsystem of the education system (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1984), the education of the blind before 1950's can be regarded as the filling of the charity vacuum by the female missionaries whose values and interests met the needs of the blind girls. However, after 1950's, with the state intervention, and pushed on by factors such as economic development, demographics, education policies, which stipulated compulsory education, and more recently the drive towards integration, the arena of the education of the blind has been joined by more and more social participants, whose interests are co-ordinated through the Government's and the social service sector's co-ordinating mechanisms. Most important of all, the educated blind have participated in the arena through their self-help organizations.

3.2 The self-help movement of the blind in Hong Kong

Now we come to the development of the self-help movement

of the blind in Hong Kong. It will begin with a description of the human rights movement of the blind from a global perspective. Then, it will be followed by the introduction of the aims and organization of the self-help movement in general. Finally, the attention will be drawn to the self-help movement of the blind in Hong Kong since the 1960's.

3.2.1 *Human rights and the blind*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights passed by the United Nations in 1948 opened a new chapter for the self-help movement of the blind. Article 1 of the Declaration states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." This Article originates the ideas from Rousseau and the Liberal Theorists during the French Revolution as well as that of Jefferson after the Independence of America. They did not agree with Plato that "Most individuals inherited the qualities of their parents, were therefore innately unequal and should fit into niches appropriate to their skills". Instead, they accept all men possess a measure of civic virtue or reason which if exploited through education would make it possible for all citizens to judge policies, although only a few members of a democracy could formulate them (Holmes, 1985).

In 1971 the United Nations approved the Declaration of the Rights of the Mentally Deficient, and in 1975, the Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons. This latter Declaration encompasses the situation of blind persons and constitutes the statement underlying the rights of the blind. Both the Universal Declaration and the Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons set forth equality as the first right. Like everybody else, disabled persons are equal as regards their origin and fate. This moral foundation is a basic prerequisite for any approach to disablement both from the individual angle and from the familial and social angle.

So far as blind persons are concerned, the lack of equality may often be likened to the lack of opportunities. Frequently denied to those deprived of sight is access to education. According to Enrique Elissalde (1986), "Striving for equal rights involves, in the case of blind persons, realization, analysis and denunciation of the lack of opportunities on various levels of personal and collective life". This is the philosophical foundation for the self-help movement of the blind.

To put words into deeds, some United Nations organizations, such as the International Labour Organization and the World Health Organization, have included the issues of the disabled in their programmes. Besides, some international

organizations specially for the purpose of improving the situation of the disabled and the blind have been set up, including Helen Keller International and the International Council for the Education of the Visually Impaired. Most important of all, the World Blind Union (WBU) was established in 1984.

The World Blind Union was a merger of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB) and the International Federation of the Blind (IFB). WCWB represented the interest of the service agencies for the blind and IFB was organised by the self-help organizations of the blind throughout the world. HKBFC was a member of IFB before 1984 and is a member of WBU after the merging of WCWB and IFB.

3.2.2 Aims and organization of the self-help movement

As people discover the capacities and resources they have within themselves, they also tap the potential for forming the self-help groups. The concept of people gathering to meeting their own needs around a certain area seems that they must have some common-interest bonds. One of the explanations why these groups are forming and expanding has been that they are quasi-extended families. At one time people could turn for assistance to the natural support groups of neighbours, church members and families. Self-help groups provide opportunities to network with people - to call people to know what they are

going through. They supplement professional services (Kimbrough, 1983).

A self-help group is defined as "a group of individuals who organize themselves in a viable group structure to pursue common goals of furthering their own welfare and interests" (HKG, 1992, Para. 10.8). A self-help group of the blind is run and managed by the blind themselves based on a constitution.

3.2.3 *Self-help organizations of the blind in Hong Kong*

The self-help groups of the blind in Hong Kong can be traced to the guilds of the blind in imperial China. Occupations for the blind in imperial China were story-telling, musical entertainment, massage, and fortune-telling (French, 1932). To protect their interests, they had their guilds during China's last three dynasties (1368-1911). These guilds were similar to other guilds in organization, apprenticeship practice, and self-regulation. Guild membership usually involved an apprenticeship of three to seven years. Apprentices had to pay for their training and were responsible for their own safety. Blind apprentices received a vocational education which resulted in their permanent membership in an autonomous organization. The apprentice system led to the development of privately run schools. In China, thousands of blind people were trained as

fortune-tellers before 1949. There were also schools for musicians and story-tellers (Fryer, 1942, p. 155).

In the early 1960's, the graduates of the schools for the blind in Hong Kong had been equipped to become wage labourers. Some became telephone operators. Their self-awareness had been raised. They wanted to strive for equal status with their sighted counterparts, so they founded their own organization, Hong Kong Blind Friends' Club (HKBFC), in 1964. HKBFC, being the oldest of the self-help organizations in Hong Kong, aims to define the reality of the blind in a positive way (HKG, 1995, Ch. 2). The activists under study had been active members of HKBFC.

On the other hand, Hong Kong Federation of the Blind (HKFB) and Hong Kong Retinitis Pigmentosa Society (HKRPS) were founded in 1972 and 1995 respectively. These groups have been participating in the Government's consultation mechanisms and in delivering services to the blind. They not only provide social, educational and leisure activities, but also promote a spirit of mutual help among the blind themselves. They are formed and managed by self-motivated blind persons. They promote the rights of blind persons, carry out consciousness-raising campaigns, conduct public education campaigns, carry out research to identify their needs, make recommendations to Government on policy matters, and express

their views to service organizations (HKAB, 1993). They play a positive role in promoting awareness of the needs of the blind and improving on service delivery. Chapter eight will describe the commitment of the blind activists under study in HKBFC in detail.

In this study, whether education has affected the blind social activists to define their collective need and to formulate their strategy to achieve their goals in the changing society in the past few decades will be examined through in-depth interviews. This is why I have adopted qualitative research methods.

Notes

1. Historical and cultural investigations have reported that blind people came to be considered special wards of the church because of the Christian ideals of charity and pity (Monbeck, 1973; Lowenfel, 1981, pp.112-119). Even now, some services for the blind in Hong Kong are run by religious bodies.

2. Refer to sub-section 1.2.1 and note 1 of chapter 1.

3. Refer to note 2 of chapter 1.

Chapter 4 - Research design

This chapter outlines the research design of the study, that is, "The arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedure" (Selltiz et al., 1976, p.90). To begin with, I will introduce the terms related to blindness and define the concepts concerned so as to delimit the scope of the study. Then, the reserach methods used in, the study together with sample selection, data collection and data organization will be presented. Finally, the chapter will end with the limitations of the study.

4.1 Definitions of blindness and related terms

4.1.1 *Visual capacity and the category of people with visual impairments*

When visual functioning is constrained by visual capacity it is due to an impairment of the peripheral visual system - the eye and the neural pathways leading to the visual cortex (Colenbrander, 1977). Colenbrander's (1977) modification of the World Health Organization's classification of visual performance provides three functional categories: Blind (subdivided into moderately, severely and totally blind), low vision (subdivided into moderately and severely low vision), and normal vision (subdivided into normal and near normal vision).

In Hong Kong, for educational purpose, the following categories of the people with visual impairments are currently classified by the Education Department (HKG, 1991, ch. 5):

1) Totally blind - persons with no visual function, i.e. no light perception.

2) The low vision group have varying degrees of residual vision ranging from perception of light to the maximum degree of vision permissible within the existing limits applicable to blind registration, i.e. visual acuity of 6/60 or less in the better eye after correction, or more than 6/60 if visual field is no greater than 20 degrees. They include the following sub-groups:

(a) The severely low vision - persons with visual acuity from 6/120 to 6/1900, hand movement and light perception or persons with contracted visual field in which the widest field diameter subtends an angular subtense less than 20 degrees irrespective of the central visual acuity.

(b) The moderately low vision - persons with visual acuity from 6/60 to 6/92.

(c) The mildly low vision (the partially sighted) - persons with visual acuity from 6/18 to 6/48.

(A central visual acuity refers to that of the better eye with correcting glasses.)

In addition to the above classification, H. H. Lam (1986)

considers that there are two different ways of classifying blind people: Totally blind versus low vision and congenitally blind versus post-congenitally blind. The degree of blindness and the process of becoming blind imply different problems facing blind individuals and the types of services they need. These also affect how they perceive their own role in promoting the welfare of blind people (Lam, 1986, p.21).

4.1.2 *Impairment, disability and handicap*

Impairment, disability and handicap are always used interchangeably by laymen. However, rehabilitation practitioners have defined them according to medical, functional and social criteria. WHO (1980) defines an impairment as "Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, anatomical structure or function" and a disability as "Any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being". The concept of disability is a functional definition which is related to activities of daily living.

On the other hand, a handicap is defined as a clash between the individual's functional ability and the requirements imposed by the environment (WHO, 1980). The task of rehabilitation is the improvement of the physical and the mental environment from the point of view of handicapped

people. Thus, handicap is a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal, depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors, for that individual. "Handicap is therefore a function of the relationship between disabled persons and their environment. It occurs when they encounter cultural, physical or social barriers which prevent their access to the various systems of society that are available to other citizens. Handicap is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the life of the community on an equal level with others" (HKG, 1992, p.8). An essential principle of the education of the blind is to maximize capability in the presence of visual impairments, and to maximize the degree of ability in the presence of visual disabilities.

4.2 Scope of the study

In order to know if and how education empowers the blind, I selected four blind social activists and investigated their schooling process and their schooling influence in the Ebenezer School and Home for the Blind (The Ebenezer) during the 1950's and/or the 1960's as recalled by themselves. The main concepts of the research are "Education", "Empowerment" and "Blind social activists".

"Education" is defined by Coleman (1965, p.13) as

"Teaching and related activities in schools". In this study, the above definition is used with the following modifications. In addition to teaching and related activities in the Ebenezer during the 1950's and the 1960's when there was no integrated education programme for the blind in Hong Kong, the concept of education in this study also covers the school social interaction which is treated as a factor to shape the interpretation of reality by students during schooling.

As elaborated in section two of chapter two, empowerment is a process by which one increasingly take greater charge of oneself and one's life. The building blocks for empowerment are: Skills, information, beliefs, goals, values (Fletcher, 1989). "A school may be said to empower the blind student to the extent that he or she is equipped with the tools - the knowledge, skills, motivation, and self-confidence - which are necessary to enable him or her to take charge and to make sound judgements and decisions based upon fact, skill, and ability so that the student can be the best adult which he or she is capable of becoming" (Omvig, 1994). As I examined the influence of schooling through activism, I take heed of the ability of the blind activists to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.

In this study, I adopt the Education Department's

definition of blindness listed in sub-section 4.1.1 of this chapter, "Persons with no visual function and persons with varying degrees of residual vision ranging from perception of light to the maximum degree of vision permissible within the existing limits applicable to blind registration, i.e. visual acuity of 6/60 or less in the better eye after correction, or more than 6/60 if visual field is no greater than 20 degrees" (HKG, 1991, ch. 5). Blind social activists are active members (i.e. core members and decision-makers) of a self-help organization of the blind.

4.3 Research methods

I conducted a qualitative research study to investigate whether and how the four respondents, who were enrolled to the Ebenezer in the 1950's, came to empower themselves during and after schooling. According to Morse (1994), qualitative research aims to understand a complex social situation on its own terms without prescriptive limits. He also points out that qualitative research examines what people are doing and how they interpret what is occurring. It does so through in-depth case-study interviewing and documentation in this case study.

The findings from my research reveal that there are no simple answers to whether and how each respondent came to empower themselves during and after schooling. Indeed, it is

clear that education and empowerment are social phenomena defined by time, place, persons, and events. A blind social activist's unique interpretation of reality rests on how he perceives his role in relation to others during and after schooling, as well as on the previous understandings he brings to the experience. These understandings are unearthed through the ethnographic, qualitative process (Morse 1994).

Because the manner in which each individual comes to understand his or her experiences is a social phenomenon defined by time, place, persons, and events, qualitative research seeks to tease apart, understand, and explain all these threads that constitute the social fabrication of meaning. The meaning, symbolised as understandings, was the core of this study (Sieber, 1975).

The two methods I used to obtain data are document review and in-depth interviewing. I examined relevant reports of the Government, schools for the blind and organizations of and for the blind. I have also got five audio tapes of the oral description of the history of the Ebenezer by a former student who is over 80 years old.

Another method I used is in-depth interviewing. Interviewing is the most essential component of my research. In order to get a certain knowledge of the schooling and the

life of the blind, I conducted a total of four interviews with two blind elderly women in July 1993 and two middle-aged blind women in 1994 respectively. They told me a lot of their life experiences and the history of the Ebenezer. It is useful for the preparation of a systematic attempt to collect the insights because it is necessary to have some preliminary ideas of the important issues in the area (Selltiz et al., 1976, p.95).

Interviewing in qualitative research differs from more traditional research. Although interviews may begin with some basic questions and strategies for probing statements, the interviewer usually structures the sessions loosely to allow the interviewees to discuss events that are important to them. "The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their understandings in their own terms" (Patton, 1982, p.205). I want the interviews to help me understand the situation from the perspectives of the respondents.

Before an interview schedule for the systematic questioning of informants was developed, the information had been supplemented by four unstructured interviews with four blind people mentioned above. Hence, an interview guide (see appendix) could be drafted. The interview with structure is to ensure that the questions are responded. However, the

interview should allow the respondent to raise issues the investigator has not previously considered (Selltiz et al., 1976, p.95).

In formulating questions for the interview schedule, it was concerned with the schooling, as well as the pre-school and post-school life of the respondents. The focus is on whether schooling has changed their interpretation of reality and whether schooling has empowered themselves to be active in the self-help movement of the blind.

4.4 Sample selection

Purposive, theoretical, or judgmental sampling is commonly used in qualitative studies (Tesch, 1990). The respondents in the study were carefully selected. The aim of this kind of study is to obtain ideas and insight rather than statistics. Thus, the respondents had to be chosen because of the likelihood that they would offer the contributions sought (Selltiz et al., 1976, p.94). There is no simple rule for determining the number of informants who should be interviewed in a qualitative study. At a certain point, additional interviews do not provide new insights. At this point, further interviewing only provides the answer falling into a familiar pattern (Selltiz et al., 1976, p.95). The number of school leavers of the Ebenezer during the period under study is less than one hundred. Among them, the number of social

activists is just over twenty, three of whom were former presidents of the Hong Kong Blind Union (HKBU). Thus, it was decided to select four informants.

To start with the selection process, I tried to locate as many prospective interviewees as possible. I had to get some of their personal details from my friends, the Ebenezer and HKBU. It was by no means an easy task because the Ebenezer had incomplete record of its former students graduated before 1963. The Ebenezer provided me with a name list of its graduates from the 1950's to 1970 without personal details, except names, sex and the years of graduation (of those graduated between 1964 and 1970). The graduation years and sex distribution of these school leavers are shown in the following table.

Table 4.1

School Leavers of the Ebenezer School and Home for the Blind

| Year of graduation | Male | Female | Total |
|--------------------|------|--------|-------|
| 1950-63 | 17 | 12 | 29 |
| 1964 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| 1965 | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| 1966 | 9 | 2 | 11 |
| 1967 | 11 | 4 | 15 |
| 1968 | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| 1969 | 13 | 3 | 16 |
| 1970 | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| | 70 | 34 | 104 |

As mentioned above, in addition to documentation, I selected four former students of the Ebenezer for qualitative interviewing. Among them, three are former presidents of HKBU, which has five presidents up to now. The remaining two presidents who graduated from the Ebenezer in the 1970's are not in the sample population. The fourth respondent was selected because he saw the founding of HKBU, became an active member for nearly a decade and has been keeping a close eye on the work of HKBU since his withdrawal from its executive committee.

4.5 Data collection and organization

I have conducted a total of eight interviews, two for each respondent, held at their homes or the Services Centre of HKBU during the period between March 1995 and August 1995. The length of each interview is from one to two hours. The purpose of the second interview for each respondent is to complete the interview guide which had not been completed in the first interview. The time left in the second interview was to allow the respondent to talk freely. Their response was good and they were willing to share their past experiences with me.⁷ Besides, some short follow-up telephone interviews were made with them for clarifying some ambiguous points while I was writing the transcription.

All the interviews were recorded on tapes. Verbatim transcription was made in Chinese braille for all interviews first. Afterwards, I summarized the transcription into English with items and sub-items for analysis.

4.6 Limitations of the study

First, a limitation may arise from the inconsistency of the information obtained. The information may differ from the objective facts due to the interviewees' memory and subjectivity. However, my focus is on their reflection of the education they received, their meaning of empowerment and their interpretation of reality.

Second, this research collects qualitative data which may not be able to cover all the factors affecting the respondents' interpretation of reality. Instead, qualitative research methods used in this study aim to provide an understanding of the depth rather than the breadth of the problem studied. The analysis can only be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Third, qualitative research studies need a long time in data collection and analysis, especially through techniques like interviews. Given the limitation of time, there may not be enough information explored from the respondents to find out a common pattern of actions. Thus, generalisation of the results will unlikely be made.

In sum, it is a qualitative study that describes, narrates, and interprets what had taken place in the life of the four blind activists selected. In the chapters that follow, the schooling process as recalled by them and its influence on their subsequent participation in the self-help movement of the blind will be described and discussed. Next chapter gives a profile of the four blind social activists.

Chapter 5

The profile of four blind social activists

The following is a profile of the four blind social activists selected for the study. Their real names will not be disclosed for the sake of anonymity. All of them got blinded as a result of complication of measles before their schooling age. They entered the Ebenezer School and Home for the Blind (the Ebenezer) in the 1950's and were graduated in the 1960's. They have been/were telephone operators - the most prestigious occupation for the blind at the time of their graduation. They have one more thing in common. That is, they had been active in the self-help movement of the blind.

5.1 Adam - the eldest son

Adam, who still has light perception, was born in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province of China, in 1940. His father was a businessman. His family hired servants to carry out housework. Adam was the eldest son, who had two elder sisters and six younger siblings. He played with them and he felt very happy in his childhood. He went and played everywhere. As a male, he thought that he should learn some social skills and hobbies, such as playing chess, fishing and swimming. He learned these from his siblings and his father.

Adam's family came to Hong Kong in 1949 and settled in Cheung Chau, a small outlying island. Then, the economic situation of his family became worse and all servants were dismissed. Water had to be obtained from the water mains a few hundred yards away from his home. As the eldest son, he was unwilling to accept the fact that water was delivered by his elder sisters. Thus, he together with one of his younger brothers replaced their sisters to deliver water. It was the first challenge in his life.

Again, in order to support his family, at the age of twelve, Adam did his very best to meet the second challenge by selling soft drinks at a football pitch. The second challenge enriched his life experience and enhanced his independence.

On the Cheung Chau Island, Adam's neighbours were very familiar with him. Adam sometimes played chess with them. A newspaper reporter interviewed him and published his story which aroused the attention of the Social Welfare Office. Hence, Adam was referred to the Ebenezer at the age of sixteen.

Adam was not given a boarding place in the school. Instead, he was arranged to live in the North Point Refugee Camp (the Camp) with ten other blind roommates. They went to

the Ebenezer every weekday morning and returned to the Camp after school. He suspended schooling and resumed hawking for several months. He returned to school later but he did not complete primary education because he changed to attend a telephony course. Upon completion of the course, he was employed by a private company as a telephone operator.

After having got a job, Adam concentrated on founding the Hong Kong Blind Friends' Club (HKBFC). He was assisted by a number of people, including a teacher of the Ebenezer, a staff member of the Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB) and his former schoolmates, whereas some other people dissuaded him from doing so. Despite this, he was successful in establishing the first self-help organization of the blind in Hong Kong.

Adam met a lot of sighted people in Cheung Chau, the Ebenezer, the Camp, HKSB (which ran the telephony course), the church and philanthropists' clubs. They held different attitudes, positive or negative, towards the blind. In his view, no one fully understands the blind. Thus, it has been his hope that HKBFC can help its members and treat them as family members. HKBFC should do whatever an individual blind person cannot do on his/her own.

Adam is proud of many records he made in Hong Kong - the

first blind telephone operator in the private sector, the first blind student in an ordinary English night school, the first blind chairman of an owner's corporation, the first blind person enrolled in a life guard course and most important of all, a founder of the first organization of the blind.

Adam is married and has a son who has completed secondary education. He does not serve HKBFC (the present Hong Kong Blind Union 'HKBU') as an executive committee member now. Instead, he has joined a number of activities, such as cycling, Cantonese opera and social service.

5.2 Bill - the youngest son

Bill was born in Hong Kong in 1944. His parents loved him very much because he was the youngest son. He has one elder brother and one elder sister who were born in China. When he became blind, his father was very sad. It came another blow that his mother died of illness shortly afterwards. This double attack not only made Bill's father unable to concentrate on his business, but also affected his mental health.

Bill's brother and sister, who were ten and eight years older than Bill, suffered a lot for him. For example, his father was always out of temper and Bill's siblings were

scapegoats. Also, they shouldered the responsibility of the family so they received little education.

Before Bill entered the Ebenezer, he always played with his siblings and other children who lived in the same building. They always played on the rooftop. Some children bullied him and some others lent him a hand. When mentioning this, he felt a little bit angry and he regarded it as childish. However, the first person who gave him a feeling of friendship was a girl whose parents were teachers. When she returned from school, she asked him to go to the rooftop. While she was having her lunch she would tell him what she had learned at school that day.

In 1956, the Social Welfare Office referred Bill to the Ebenezer. At first, he was a day pupil. Every morning, his father took him to Central where he met other day pupils, including Adam, and continued the journey to school. In Primary 4, he was offered a boarding place.

Bill seldom had contact with outsiders in school. Sometimes he could go for a concert. On Saturdays, some foreigners took the students to the beach.

In Form 2, Bill began to study hard because he learned that a senior student had been sent to the United States for

further studies. Upon completion of Form 4, he attended a telephony course and took an English course in an evening school. Having finished the former course, he found a job as telephone operator in Tong Fuk Prison. It was the third offer. The first two offers were unsuccessful because of underpayment and extra job requirements. He is still doing the same job.

Bill served HKBFC from the mid-1960's until the early 1970's. In the beginning, Adam returned to the Ebenezer to enlist organizers. Bill only gave advice and did not join the organizing committee. After the founding of HKBFC, he was a member of the first executive committee. He enjoyed the work in HKBFC in spite of having to render time, money and effort. For him, the most memorable incidents during his term of service were the strike of blind workers, the establishment of a talking book library and a survey on the transport needs of the blind. Although he was critical and out-spoken, his withdrawal from activism was partly due to the negative responses and criticisms from other members of HKBFC.

Bill got married in 1973. Afterwards, he was not active in the affairs of HKBFC. He paid his full attention to his family. To tutor his two sons, he used tape-recorder to assist them to practise dictation. His elder son is studying in the University of Hong Kong. He does not expect them to

have outstanding achievements, but he hopes they will not be the liability of society.

Now, Bill has more sparetime so he can take part in some activities, such as the Cantonese opera. Also, he is still enthusiastic to express his views on the affairs of the blind in seminars and general meetings of HKBU.

5.3 Cain - under the care of housemaid

Cain, born in China in 1948, was blinded at the age of one or so. He had no sibling and playmate prior to his schooling in 1956. He did not feel the difference between seeing and being blind until he left the Ebenezer.

Cain's mother was born in a rich family. Her family did not like her falling in love with his father so she fled from her home. Consequently, she broke her relationship with her family.

When Cain was three, he always heard his parents quarrel with each other. They separated and went away. Cain has never met his father again. Since then, Cain only lived with a housemaid who looked after him. His mother supported their living.

During the ten years in the Ebenezer, Cain seldom

contacted the outside world. One memorable incident was that a film entitled "Guangmingbizailai" (Light must come back) was produced in the school. He also remembered a summer camp on an outlying island. In the camp, he met some sighted students.

After graduation in 1966, Cain's mother hired a tutor to teach him English for two years. A former schoolmate gave him braille copies of "The Readers' Digest", which were used as textbooks. In 1968, he attended a telephony course. The course lasted for a year and he spent another year to look for a job. He did the job of telephone operator in a voluntary organization for 17 years.

Cain joined HKBFC in 1968. After having found a job, he became a committee member of HKBFC. He served HKBFC, which renamed the Hong Kong Association of the Blind (HKAB) in 1974, until 1987.

The housemaid helped rear his two children so Cain could serve HKBFC/HKAB wholeheartedly. His children joined with him in many activities of HKAB. They were proud of his work in HKAB and were familiar with the blind.

In the mid-1980's, Cain learned that his colleagues adopted a negative attitude towards him so he decided to

resign. He then worked as a full-time staff in HKAB. However, as an employee, it was difficult to cooperate with the executive committee. Because of this, he resigned and joined a partnership with other blind friends to carry out his first business. His business was not successful. He has changed his job as a masseur now.

Though the working experience as a staff member in HKAB did affect his enthusiasm in the self-help movement of the blind, Cain thought that democracy requires men to obey the elected. The elected executive committee have the power to steer HKAB. He does not blame the committee for their excessive demands on him during his term of service as a paid staff member in HKAB.

Cain's elder daughter has completed the university education in the United States. He cannot be active in HKBU now because of his irregular working hours.

5.4 David - to be cradled in the nursery of the Ebenezer

David was born in Hong Kong in 1950. He is the eldest brother of seven siblings. He became blind at the age of two. A few months later, an American missionary, who met David and his parents in the street, referred him to the Ebenezer.

David was given a boarding place in the Ebenezer and was

looked after by housemothers. He lived in a room with other older children. In kindergarten, he played tricycle, jigsaw, hide-and-seek, etc.. His parents took him home several times a year. Therefore, the social environment in which he grew up was different from that of his younger siblings.

Though the disabled scout scheme was implemented in the Ebenezer, David seldom contacted the sighted. When he was nine he was aware of his blindness. In an accident, his arm was broken because he failed to climb through a window. Not only the accident reminded him of the limitation of blindness, but also a nurse who called him "Blind boy" insulted him.

Since the acceptance of the government subvention, more and more sighted teachers were employed so the number of blind teachers in the Ebenezer was decreasing. Also, housemothers were employed to look after the students. However, both the sighted teachers and the housemothers treated the low-vision students more favourably. For this reason, David felt that inferiority and blindness were the two sides of the same coin. He observed that the academic results of the severely blind were better than those with residual vision. It was because the severely blind were more diligent in order to outstrip the low-visioned.

David's idol was Zhou Enlai, the then Prime Minister of

China. Perhaps they have the same surname. More importantly, during the days in the Ebenezer, he saw that those who had money enjoyed more. The feeling of inequality and inferiority in school, especially being assigned to study the telephony course which he did not like, was responsible for his appreciation of the new China's socialism and America's democracy.

David hoped to be a preacher but his parents wished him to be a teacher in the Ebenezer. When he completed Form 3 he felt that his future was designed by the school. Though he wanted to further his studies in a Taiwanese secondary school for the blind, he was arranged to study a telephony course. After completion of the course, he was employed by a hospital as telephone operator.

Between 1972 and 1976, David worked as Assistant Superintendent in the Hostel of HKSB. At the same time, he was the Chairman of HKBFC. The reason for his appointment in HKSB, he said, was that HKSB wanted HKBFC not to be progressive. He was not willing to serve this purpose, so he resigned from the post.

David was a member of the executive committee of HKBFC/HKAB between 1968 and 1983. He liked reading foreign braille magazines because he enjoyed making pen-pals. Because

of this hobby, he read about the news of the second general assembly of the International Federation of the Blind in 1974 and HKBFC had its representatives, Cain and David, attending the assembly. Through the assembly, they knew the philosophy and practice of the self-help movement of the blind in Europe and the United States.

David became inactive in HKAB in the early 1980's as a result of the confrontation with a young leader. From then on, he has been critical of the affairs of HKAB/HKBU, but has not acted as its core member. Instead, he is busy with his family and church affairs.

From 1977 to 1981, David studied a Theology course. Consequently, he has been a part-time preacher. Between 1987 and 1988 he taught Bible lessons in the Ebenezer. He is also a board member of the Christian Ministry to the Visually Impaired.

David is married and has two children. In addition to his part-time work as a preacher in his church, his full-time job is telephone operator in the Government starting from the late 1970's.

The above has given a brief account of the life histories of the four blind social activists under study. Based upon

this description, the following three chapters will touch upon their changing interpretation of reality from their pre-school life, through their schooling process, to their participation in the self-help movement of the blind. The final chapter will be an attempt to discuss the role of education in empowering themselves as activists in the redefinition of the reality of the blind in Hong Kong.

Chapter 6 - Onset of blindness:

The formation of an unseen reality in the seeing world

Given the similarity in the age of onset of blindness and the type of vision loss, the environmental opportunities available for the four blind social activists in family, school and society in relation to their interpretation of reality are investigated from chapter 6 to chapter 8. This chapter will examine their social environments during their preschool years and their interpretation of reality starting from the onset of blindness. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section describes the social interaction that they had with their sighted counterparts, mainly family members. The second section discusses the problems and the challenges arising from blindness under the social environments mentioned in the first section. The focus is on the emergence of the problems and the coping methods used by the blind activists in relation to their actions toward blindness on the basis of the meanings that blindness had for them, their social interaction and the interpretative process used by them in dealing with blindness.

6.1 The social environment after the onset of blindness

The parents' reactions to the blindness of their child

are of importance.[1] Also, the social interaction that the blind have with their siblings and other people forms part of their reality in the seeing world. The following is the description of the reorganization of these social relationships that the blind activists had after they had lost their eye sight.

6.1.1 *The influence of parents/carers*

All of the four activists - Adam, Bill, Cain and David - got blinded as a result of complication of measles before their schooling age. They were not born blind but congenitally blind, that is, becoming blind before the age of five. However small they were at the onset of blindness, they had to face and cope with a new reality, which was socially constructed for the blind.

Adam grew up in a normal family with parents and siblings. Despite his blindness, Adam felt that his siblings and he were treated as equals by their parents. At that time, parents would arrange a starting schooling ceremony for their sons. During the ceremony, a man of letters was invited to the family and their sons were guided to write something on a piece of paper. Adam's parents arranged this ceremony for him and his two brothers, although he did not go to school afterwards as his brothers. Anyway, the sense of equality was not offset by the loss of educational opportunity. Instead of receiving formal education, his father was the model he wanted

to imitate. He learned playing chess, fishing, swimming and other games from his siblings and his father. He considered that these hobbies should be learned by men.

Bill was less fortunate because he lived in a single-parent family with two elder siblings. His mother died shortly after he had got blinded. His father adopted the attitude of over-protectiveness towards him. He was not required to do anything at home. When his father was angry, only Bill's siblings were scolded. On the other hand, after the death of Bill's mother, his father could not concentrate on work. Thus, under the influence of the model of his father, Bill does not care achievement. He did not study hard in the Ebenezer until graduation was near.

In the absence of parental care, Cain was looked after by a housemaid. The housemaid was the only person he had interacted with and responded to before he entered the Ebenezer. Cain was growing up in a restrictive and protective social environment. Like the housemaid, he was simple-minded and his life was monotonous before joining the self-help movement of the blind.

As a boarding student, David was under the care of housemothers. He was unhappy with them because they treated the blind and the low-visioned differently. Similarly, although he seldom returned home, he felt his parents treated

his siblings more favourably. At home, he did not need to do anything and was not allowed to go outside. He lived in two worlds, the school which allowed him to explore through games and the home which was restrictive. However, inequality existed in both social environments in which he was the victim. The carers - the housemothers and the parents - were the unjust dictators rather than the kind kings.

6.1.2 *Sibling relationship*

Another important kind of social relationship in family is sibling relationship. Except Cain, the other three blind activists had siblings to live and play with in their childhood. The following is a brief account of the reactions of their siblings to the blindness of their brothers and the interpretation of these reactions by the blind activists concerned.

Adam was the eldest son, who had two elder sisters and six younger siblings. He played all kinds of games with his younger siblings in the street all day long and he felt very happy then. Adam's brothers were his playmates. Also, they were his partners in performing some tasks, such as delivering water and rice. In the case of delivering water for the family, he reasserted his role as a male and as an eldest brother.

Bill's relationship with his siblings was different from

that of Adam. More than playing together, it was a giver-and-receiver relationship. Bill had two elder siblings. He said, "My elder brother and elder sister suffered a lot for me. After I had been blinded, my father always lost his temper. They were scolded. They also shouldered the responsibility of the family so they received little education." Bill was, therefore, indebted to his siblings for their sacrifice which he was unable to render at that time.

As David entered the Ebenezer at his early childhood and he seldom returned home, his relationship with his siblings was not close. He was the eldest son and had three sisters and three brothers. According to David, they were treated more favourably by his parents. His siblings sometimes compared themselves with him. They thought they should not be outstripped by their blind brother. David's sibling relationship was not facilitated by frequent interaction, but potential conflicts did exist.

From the above brief description, family roles were reorganized as the result of sudden loss of vision in the four blind activists. Blindness in themselves became a family affair. All members of their families, parents and siblings, were forced to share it with themselves in some way.

6.1.3 *Social interaction with other people*

Adam's experience was rich in human relationship. He

mentioned, "I had contact with many people in Cheung Chau, which was very small and sparsely populated. Many people there knew me because I liked to go everywhere. The Head of the Saint John Hospital appreciated me very much and he gave me the newspaper cutting of my story. When my family members were ill we did not need to queue. Besides, the Father of the church did not mind my blindness because he asked me and my brothers to deliver rice on a boat to Ping Chau." Adam's neighbours were very familiar with him and some of them called him "Blind boy", but he did not mind. Even when he sold frozen olives, he called his business "Blind Boy Stall". In sparetime, he swam, caught fish and even played chess with his neighbours. This social relationship based upon frequent contact and mutual acceptance was different from what he found in the North Point Refugee Camp and the telephony class, which will be mentioned in the next chapter.

Before Bill entered the Ebenezer, he always played with his siblings and other children who lived nearby. They played on the rooftop every night. He was always bullied and called "Blind boy", although other children might help him. From this, he learned the first lesson of social prejudice and social discrimination against blindness. This is why he does not support early integrated education for the blind. From his experience small sighted children may hurt blind children unintentionally. However, at the same time, he also experienced friendship. A small girl was willing to share

what she had learned with him. Friends and foes were in the same group of children.

When David was 3, he was admitted to the Ebenezer. David was a boarding student and lived in a room with other blind children of different ages. In kindergarten, he played tricycles, jigsaws, rolling tins, hide-and-seek, finger-guessing games and role play. The role of games together with the blind playmates was important in the development of David.

The four blind activists lived in different social environments. To a certain extent, they had to reorganize the already-established relationships with people and with the environment. Also, they had to modify the taken-for-granted methods of doing things, which is the focus of next section.

6.2 The problems and challenges

Carroll (1961) interprets blindness which occurs in adult life as a multiple handicap consisting in twenty fundamental losses in six major areas.[2] It is the end of acquired methods of doing things. Under the social environments just mentioned, the following is an account of the problems and challenges faced by the four blind activists during their preschool years. I begin with the losses and restrictions related to and arising from their blindness.

6.2.1 *The losses and the restrictions*

Adam's blindness was not welcomed by his parents because it deprived their son of the earning capability. They sometimes told Adam, "You picked up a banknote on the road before being blinded." His parents felt that there was a limit to blindness which made Adam not only disabled, but also unable to do many things. Perhaps, this was why Adam took every possible step to proving that he was a contributive member of the family.

Bill's blindness was a starting point for the breakup of his family. He was born in a just settled family and lost his sight as a small child resulting from a severe eye infection. As soon as Bill had lost his sight, his mother died. Her death was a great shock to his father, who suffered from mental illness and gave up his job. As a result, the burden of Bill's family had to be shouldered by his elder siblings. Hence, Bill was indebted to his siblings for their sacrifice.

Without parents and siblings living together, Cain's blindness restricted himself from knowing and contacting the seeing world. Cain was left by his parents under the protection of a housemaid who provided nurture for him. Before entering the Ebenezer, he had no social interaction with other people. He was independent of the outside influence. He was not influenced by and had no need to respond to the social attitudes towards blindness till his

graduation from the Ebenezer. Therefore, his childhood was tranquil and isolated. He knew little about the seeing world. "My childhood was dull and ignorant. I had no siblings and playmates to play with. Even though I had been sent to the Ebenezer, I did not feel being different from others. I began to feel different from the sighted after I left the Ebenezer."

Blindness in David led him to live an institutionalized life from his early childhood. In comparison with Cain, David's childhood was more colourful. As he entered the nursery of the Ebenezer at the age of three, he could play with other blind children. However, the segregation from the seeing children made him unaware of the limitation of blindness and the difference between blindness and seeing until his arm injury as a result of climbing through a window at the age of eight. More than a pain in the arm, a nurse added insult to his injury. Deep in his mind, blindness is something more than inconvenience. Blindness is also the cause of insult to which he had to stand firm to react in the years to come.

During the pre-school years, the four blind activists not only lost their sight, but also the normal expectation of parents on them. They lived in a restrictive environment in which they might be devalued and underdeveloped. Without education and proper guidance, some of the blind activists under study used some methods to overcome the above-mentioned

problems.

6.2.2 *The problems and the challenges*

Challenges are opportunities with problems. Given the difference in their social environments, the four blind activists had different attitudes and ways to deal with the problems.

After coming to Hong Kong, the economic situation of Adam's family became worse and worse. As a result, all servants were dismissed. Water had to be got from the water mains on the street by his family members. As the eldest son, he was unwilling to accept the fact that water was delivered by his elder sisters. Thus, he joined with his younger brothers to deliver water. It was for the first time that he combated the challenge in his life.

Again, because of the deteriorating economic condition, at the age of twelve, three years after coming to Hong Kong, Adam did his very best to overcome the second challenge by selling soft drinks at a football pitch in order to support his family. He sold soft drinks and ice-cream in the summer, broke stones in the winter and did handiwork at home. The second challenge enriched his life experience and enhanced his independence.

In the case of Bill, he was cared and protected in the

family. Some relatives suggested him to be a telephone operator or a cashier. Some others suggested that it was better for him to learn something in a religious organization. However, Bill had no goal of life and did not worry the future until Form 2.

When David was nine he was for the first time aware of his blindness in an accident during which his arm was broken. Not only did this accident remind him of the loss of his eyesight but also he would never forget the insult arising from a nurse's perception of blindness. Consequently, he liked the message of the Bible and the concepts of democracy and socialism.

From the above, it is clear that in facing the problems, the blind are also aware of being blind in the seeing world. In one extreme, the problems, if not overcome, delimit their development. In the other extreme, once they have overcome the problems, it is more likely for them to have further development.

Onset of blindness was a starting point for the coming of a new reality. The pre-school perception of reality of the four blind activists was shaped by a number of factors, most important of all, the perception of blindness by the people with whom they had interaction. In order to examine the role of education in empowering themselves (i.e. why did they

actively respond to the reality which was taken for granted by many people?), next chapter introduces the schooling process and the schooling experiences of the four blind activists.

Notes

1. Five types of parental reaction are distinguished by Berthold Lowenfel: Acceptance of the child and his handicap, denial of the effects of the handicap, overprotectiveness, disguised rejection, and overt rejection. Refer to "The Child Who is Blind" in Berthold Lowenfeld's Berthold Lowenfeld on Blindness and Blind People - Selected Papers. New York, American Foundation for the Blind: 1981, p.29-37.

2. The twenty fundamental losses resulting from adventitious blindness mentioned by Carroll are as follows: (1) Basic losses to psychological security - the loss of physical integrity; loss of confidence in the remaining senses; loss of reality contact with environment; loss of visual background; loss of light security. (2) Losses in basic skills - loss of mobility; loss of techniques of daily living; loss of ease of written communication; loss of ease of spoken communication; loss of informational progress. (3) Losses in appreciation - loss of the visual perception of the pleasurable; loss of the visual perception of the beautiful; loss of recreation. (4) Losses concerning occupation and financial status - loss of career, vocational goal, job opportunity; loss of financial security. (5) Resulting losses to the whole personality - loss of personal independence; loss of social adequacy; loss of obscurity; loss of self-esteem; loss of total personality organization. For details, please see Thomas J. Carroll's Blindness: What it is, What it does, and How to Live with it. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961.

Chapter 7 - Education and interpretation of reality

After having examined the social environments of the four blind activists during their preschool years, this chapter delineates if and how education had influenced their interpretation of reality. As defined in chapter 4, education in this study refers to the teaching and the related activities together with the school social interaction in the Ebenezer School and Home for the Blind (the Ebenezer) during the 1950's and the 1960's when there was no integrated education programme for the blind in Hong Kong. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section introduces some unique aspects of the knowledge getting activities in which the blind activists participated. In the second section, the attention will be drawn to the social interaction and the interpretation of reality that they had in the Ebenezer. At the end of the chapter, an account of their vocational training and further studies will be given.

7.1 The unique conditions for the transmission of school knowledge

Following the pattern established by the school for blind children in Europe and America in the Nineteenth Century, the educational provisions for blind children in Hong Kong took

the form of residential schools. During the early post-Second World War years, all blind children of school age receiving education were attending the Ebenezer and the Canossa School for Blind Girls. The curriculum of both schools was more or less the same as that of the ordinary schools. In the Ebenezer, the blind children followed grade by grade about the same courses of study which were followed in the ordinary schools with some changes in methods. These include: Braille reading and writing; typewriting; talking book use; mental number work and use of an arithmetic slate as well as braille for computation; diagram drawings and use of solid, plane, and wire forms in geometry; and maps either embossed or in relief for the teaching of geography. Other unique conditions under which the school knowledge was transmitted to the four activists include the defects of Chinese braille, the lack of braille textbooks, the types of extracurricular activities and the influence of the religious atmosphere in the school.

7.1.1 The defects of Chinese braille

Braille, a six-dot combination system, was invented by a French called Louis Braille, who was blind himself, in the early 19th Century. It is a means by which the blind can get knowledge and express their thoughts. In many countries, braille is connected with the written alphabets, but Chinese braille is not the case.

The Chinese have used characters for a long time. When the missionaries established schools for the blind in Hong Kong and Guangdong in the last century, they arranged braille symbols based on Cantonese speech, not Chinese characters (Huang, 1992). The Ebenezer used Cantonese braille code in teaching Chinese language and other subjects. Hence, the difference between Chinese characters and Chinese braille hinders the blind from fully understanding Chinese literature and communicating with the sighted. They cannot fully recognize the meaning of a character without reading the whole phrase or sentence. Moreover, they cannot directly write something readable to the sighted. The limitations of Chinese braille affect their choice of subjects for further studies, their career development and their perception of the role of the blind in the seeing world.

The defects of the Chinese braille was expressed by Adam in the following remarks: "When I entered the Ebenezer, I hoped that I could learn communication as well as occupational skills, and as a result could find a job after graduation. I was disappointed when I learned that Chinese braille was based on speech, not Chinese characters. However, English braille was connected with the written alphabets and I could use typewriter in communication with the sighted. For this reason, I was more interested in English, but little English was taught in the Ebenezer."

Despite the above defects, Cain has a positive view on Chinese braille: "The use of Chinese braille can enable us to learn new things without relying entirely on memory. Moreover, based on the pronunciation of a character, we can read and write it down in braille without worrying the shape of the character."

The views of Adam and Cain represent two different but coexisting phenomena. First, the disappointment over Chinese braille has motivated some graduates of the schools for the blind in Hong Kong to choose English evening schools, Anglo-Chinese secondary schools and educational institutions in English-speaking countries for further studies. Second, braille users were in a better position in written communication and to learn new things than the illiterate blind.

7.1.2 Lack of braille textbooks

Another learning problem mentioned by the activists was the lack of braille books. Some books had to be shared with their classmates. Sometimes, they made their own copies with a slate and a stylus. This is why Bill sometimes dreams of examinations in which he is not well prepared. "At that time, there were insufficient books for each student, so I had to make a copy by myself or I could obtain a copy from senior students before a new school year began. Sometimes, I shared

a book with my classmates and arrangement for revision had to be made."

Under this condition, some students were willing to pay for copying service. David earned some money by providing this service. He could be rewarded 40 cents for a copy of a primary textbook (about 25 braille pages). It was sufficient to buy a loaf of bread.

The education for the blind unsupported by necessary resources was inevitable in the early 1960's and before because the Special Education Section was set up in 1960. The responsibility of producing braille textbooks was taken up by the Government Printing Department in 1965. The experience of overcoming this problem by personal means did promote the activists' ability in self-management, co-operation with other people and realization of being blind in the unequal education system.

7.1.3 Extracurricular activities

The extracurricular activities in the Ebenezer during the period can be divided into musical instrument training, outings and a disabled scout scheme, the purpose of which was to enable the students to develop their interest in music and to provide them with some leisure activities. In the mid-1960's, a warden was appointed to provide orientation and

mobility (O&M) training, arrange outdoor activities and take charge of the dormitory affairs.

Blind students could learn playing the piano after school but this was only arranged for a small number of students. David did not learn any musical instruments because he was not selected by the teachers. He said he was not good at music and handiwork. He always argues that the blind might not necessarily have musical talent. He cultivated other hobbies. He liked collecting coins, making pen-pals through braille foreign magazines and taking Bible correspondence course. Other common hobbies of the students included listening to radio, singing pop songs and playing football.

A disabled scout scheme was implemented. The scheme provided the students with an extracurricular activity in which they could learn some skills. Scout leaders went to the Ebenezer to organize activities. Bill recalled that "Every week, we attended a gathering. We sang songs, listened stories and learned rope knitting. Sometimes we went for picnics. We were not mixed with sighted scouts." Obviously, the scheme was implemented inside the school. It did not provide a chance for blind scouts to interact with their sighted counterparts.

Regarding outdoor activities, some were organized by the

warden. The students attended concerts, visited spots of interest and went to the beach. Again, the priority for going to concerts was given to those with music talents. Bill said, "Sometimes we could go to a concert, but priority was given to those who play piano well. On Saturdays, some foreign friends of the superintendent took us to the beach to swim or to have barbecue." As Adam was not a boarding student and he left the school in the early 1960's, there were not many extracurricular activities in which he had participated. One of Adam's memorable activities was a visit to an aircraft carrier.

Irrespective of the social integration effect of these outdoor activities, it gave the blind students the experience which the uneducated blind and the blind of the past generations were difficult to have. It also demonstrated how to organize activities. It was beneficial for them, particularly when they became organizers of recreational activities in HKBFC.

7.1.4 Religious atmosphere

The Ebenezer was a Protestant school. A German missionary was responsible for its religious affairs. Students had Bible lessons. Also, they had to attend morning and evening service. The message of Christianity was very appealing to them. For example, the love of God is great and

priceless. Whoever believes in God can be saved and become the chosen people of the Kingdom of Heaven. In addition, pity and mercy toward the blind is mentioned in the Bible, particularly in the Gospels (Matthew 9:27-30; Matthew 20:30-34). At the same time, there are some contradictions in the Bible, e.g. "The blind leading the blind".[1] However, this did not affect their faith in Christianity during schooling. Under the religious atmosphere, some students were baptized, including Bill, Cain and David.

Among them, David wished to be a preacher when he was very small, though his parents hoped that he could be a teacher in the Ebenezer. Upon completion of a part-time course in theology in the early 1980's, he has been a part-time preacher in addition to his full-time job as a telephone operator in the Government. He is also a Board member of the Christian Ministry to the Visually Impaired.

On the contrary, Bill and Cain are not enthusiastic in religious affairs after leaving the Ebenezer. "I (Bill) do not know whether I have been saved because I have many queries. For example, the Bible says we should act like children, i.e. to believe without doubt. I baptized because I grew up in the religious atmosphere of the Ebenezer." Cain was unable to go to the church because of irregular working hours. Actually, it is difficult to be an orthodox Christian

under secular influence. It is particularly difficult for the blind. According to the activists, it is not easy to be integrated in the church. For this reason, some fellowships of the blind have been set up with the aim to providing them with an opportunity to share their belief and experiences.

For Adam, he did not accept Christianity in the Ebenezer. However, many years later, he has become a Catholic. He is also active in a social service group of his church. He explained that he had become a convert because he was impressed by the services provided by the Catholic Church for the needy. He did not have such feeling in the school.

Under the above unique conditions, the blind activists were aware of the limitations arising from blindness and possible ways to make breakthroughs. At the same time, they learned some skills in organizing activities and gave some thought on the meaning of life based upon Christian beliefs. These have also provided the objective basis for the discussion of the school social interaction in the next section.

7.2 The school social interaction

This section describes the social interaction that the four blind activists had in the school. At that time, students were not required to come home every week. Many of

them stayed at school during weekends and holidays. For example, David came home several times a year. Thus, the people with whom they interacted in school were very significant in their interpretation of reality.

7.2.1 *Superintendents*

Overall responsibility for the Ebenezer was originally that of the German Hildesheim Mission, but the geographical distance between the parent body and the Ebenezer led to the Mission delegating its rights and powers for the administration, management and operation of the Ebenezer to an executive committee. Day-to-day administration is in the hands of a superintendent/director. Miss Eva Morgenstern arrived in 1954 and took up her position as superintendent. Mr. Wolfgang Stein came in 1963 and the Principal Mr. Keith Marshall in 1965. Morgenstern and Stein came from Germany, whereas Marshall was an English (ESHB, 1987). The following are the views of the activists on these three persons.

Because of the language barrier, the communication between the students and the superintendents was not easy. The two German superintendents learned and spoke some Cantonese, while Marshall relied entirely on interpretation. No doubt, the students liked the two Germans more.

In Bill's view, Morgenstern was very ambitious and

enthusiastic. She had a lot of contributions to the school. She designed teaching strategies according to one's capabilities. For example, a teacher was hired to teach Siu, a brilliant blind student, before he went to the United States for further studies. For those bad performers, she preferred to give them demotion rather than discontinuation. In order to improve school facilities, she obtained donation for the purchase of apparatus and erection of a laboratory.

However, her successors were more bureaucratic and conservative. The order of the laboratory apparatus was cancelled and some science subjects were cut. Apart from the academic subjects, Stein and Marshall also provided Domestic Science and Craftwork.

Cain liked to compare the superintendents of the Ebenezer with the presidents of HKBFC/HKAB. "Miss Eva Morgenstern, like the founders of HKBFC, had an ambitious and comprehensive plan, but her two successors completely changed her plan. They were more practical and bureaucratic."

7.2.2 Teachers

When the Ebenezer had no government subvention, nearly all the teachers were former students. They lived in the Ebenezer for their whole life. They studied, worked and lived there after retirement. However, they were gradually replaced

by sighted teachers altogether in the early 1960's.

In reply to the question of what the difference between sighted and blind teachers was, they mentioned two points. First, they had mannerisms and naps more frequently in blind teachers' lessons, whereas these socially undesirable behaviours were often prohibited by sighted teachers. Second, sighted teachers told them many interesting and strange things in the world, e.g. the experiences in the Second World War.

Notwithstanding this, the students' respect and dislike for the teachers was not related to the visual impairment. The students did not like some boring teaching methods of the blind teachers, who only read aloud the teaching materials. However, the students respected some blind teachers who were knowledgeable. Until now, the activists sometimes returned to the Ebenezer to visit some former blind teachers who are over 80 now.

On the other hand, not all sighted teachers were welcomed. Adam did not like some sighted teachers who seemed to look down upon the blind students. Adam said that they thought the blind were ignorant. Nevertheless, Adam admired a new sighted teacher called Mr. Leung very much. According to Adam, Mr. Leung was very knowledgeable and humorous. Some students were encouraged by Mr. Leung to debate on such topics

as 'existentialism' even in the recess. Under Leung's influence, Adam had an idea to organize a student body but it did not come true. "We had strong motivation to learn and we liked debating very much. To organize a student body could serve this purpose." When Adam founded HKBFC, Mr. Leung gave some advice. Leung is now the principal of an ordinary primary school.

Clearly, unlike the blind teachers, the sighted teachers came from different backgrounds. The latter could widen the students' horizon of knowledge. Moreover, the students would care their manners in the presence of the sighted teachers. However, the judgment of the teachers was ultimately based on the teaching methods, the knowledge of the teachers and the attitudes of the teachers towards the students.

7.2.3 *Housemothers*

Besides teachers, housemothers were the people with whom the students had frequent contact in the dormitory. Cain said, "In the old school building (i.e. before 1961), girls were required to mop the floor because they were told that they would have a need to do housework in the years to come. Moreover, before the new school building was erected the Ebenezer was short of money to employ staff. Thus, girls needed to perform cleansing work and other daily tasks." When the new school building had been in operation, minor staff

were employed to do cooking, cleaning and laundry work. More housemothers were also employed to look after the students.

As recalled by David, some housemothers favoured students according to the criteria of academic performance, appearance and degree of vision. Those who had residual vision could render assistance to the teachers and housemothers. In return, they were praised and rewarded.

"The housemothers treated the severely blind and the low-visioned differently. I (David) felt that inferiority and blindness are the two sides of the same coin. Despite this situation, I observed that the academic results of the severely blind were better than those with residual vision. I guessed that the severely blind intended to prove their ability in learning."

7.2.4 *Schoolmates*

In the Ebenezer, Students played with one another. In recess and after school, they walked and chatted in the playground, some of them chased one another. They played seek-and-hide, rattan balls and milk cans. Some of them liked listening to radio. Some of them were pop song enthusiasts.

Cain said that they played more than studied. Some of his schoolmates liked listening to radio, but he had no

particular hobby. His roommates carried out Christmas decoration and installed a doorbell. Cain had a radio, which became a broadcasting centre by linking it with an antenna.

Among the students, a special language which reverts the pronunciation of a Cantonese phrase was used. For example, they interchanged the vowels of a two-character phrase. By doing so, Heungjiu (banana) is read as hiujeung. This reverse Cantonese was used as an in-group language, which the sighted could not understand. They had a sense of unity and security when they talked in the reverse Cantonese. Through the use of the reverse Cantonese, they asserted their group identity.

Though there was a means to establish group identity, the activists experienced various kinds of inequalities among students. In addition to the inequality between the two sexes and between the blind and the low-visioned, David also saw the economic and age inequality. Those who had money could buy more food and even pay money for the braille copying service. In the Christmas party, the senior students were given more presents. In view of these inequalities, David favoured socialism and Christianity.

7.2.5 *Outsiders*

Although extracurricular activities were organized by the school, the students seldom contacted the people outside the

school environment. During the ten years in the Ebenezer Cain seldom contacted the outside world. One special incident was the production of a film called "Light must come back" by a film production company in the Ebenezer. The film was concerned with the story of a blind student. Some actors came to the school and talked with the students.

In the outings, the superintendents sought help from their friends, such as those working in the American Consulate. They acted as volunteer drivers and escorts. Because of the language barrier, the students could hardly ever communicate with these expatriates.

Another kind of outsiders that the blind activists could remember was the visitors. When the visitors came, students were told to be properly dressed and quiet. Bill said that the students were like prisoners, whereas Adam regarded themselves as animals of a zoo.

The school social interaction mentioned above to a certain extent revealed the actions of the school administrators, teachers of the blind, school personnel, outsiders as well as the blind themselves toward blindness on the basis of the meanings that blindness had for them. These actions represent different attitudes towards the blind, ranging from over-protection to rejection. The judgment of

these attitudes is often based upon the conception of equality, which formed the blind activists' interpretative process used by them in dealing with blindness. This will be discussed in chapter 9.

7.3 Vocational training and further studies

The four blind activists are/were telephone operators. In transition to work, all of them received vocational training or attended some courses. This section outlines the course of their vocational training and further education, particularly at the life point of choice and basic transition.

7.3.1 Vocational training

Adam's decision to attend the telephony course was based on pragmatism. He was not patient with the impractical education in the Ebenezer. When he heard the news that the Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB) had opened a telephony class, he submitted an application in an instant. His application was successful and he left the Ebenezer. "At that time, I had not completed primary education, which, I considered, would not help find a job. Employment was the most important thing."

In the case of Bill and David, they were arranged by the school to attend the telephony course. In Form 1, Bill applied for admission to a music training institute for the

blind but his application was unsuccessful. He continued his education in the Ebenezer until completion of Form 4. As a senior student had been sent abroad for further studies, Bill wanted to follow this example and began to work hard in Form 2. Upon graduation, one of his classmates was sent to the United States to learn piano tuning and the other one was employed by the Government Printing Department as brailist. Bill was arranged to attend the telephony course.

Likewise, when David graduated in Form 3, he was arranged by the school to study the telephony course. In fact, he wanted to further his studies in a Taiwanese secondary school for the blind. Therefore, he was not satisfied with the arrangement.

Unlike Bill and David who received the vocational training immediately after graduation, Cain attended the telephony class two years after he left the school. During the training period, he practised travelling alone. At first, his housemaid followed after him without telling him. He always hit the parking meters in the beginning. It was really a challenge which he overcame ultimately.

The telephony course included English and switchboard operation. The English taught was more practical. Indeed, it was not necessary to learn switchboard operation for a year

because The skills were easily grasped. The vocational training for the blind, as well as O&M training, has been institutionalized from then on.

7.3.2 *Further studies*

Regarding the further education of the blind activists, it can be divided into taking part-time courses and self-studying.

As mentioned earlier, Adam liked to learn English because it could be a medium of communication with the sighted. "When I was executive committee member of HKBFC, I was always required to use English in correspondence and luncheon meetings."

After finding a job, Adam personally persuaded the principal of a night school to accept him. "I studied English and I brought along with a typewriter to attend the examination. I lived in Shum Tseng dormitory and the school was situated in Tsuen Wan. I studied in this school for two years. I went to attend lessons thrice a week."

Similarly, Bill also studied English in an evening school. "When I attended the telephony course, I studied English in an evening school. The school required me to repeat Form 4. In Form 4, the teacher was very helpful. He

read aloud what he wrote on the blackboard. Classmates were also helpful. Some of them could see what I typed during the test. In Form 5, another teacher taught the class. He said that I was in attendance and no special arrangement was given but I would be distributed the handouts. I had no problem in Form 4 because the teacher knew my need and enabled me to know what was going on during the lesson. This was not the case in Form 5. I did not sit for the public examinations because I had found a job then."

After graduation, Cain's mother hired a tutor to teach him English for two years. Another former student of the Ebenezer, Kung, had subscribed braille copy of Readers' Digest. Kung sent the old copies to him. It was the textbook for the tutor. Hence, he knew many vocabularies but he did not know the usage. They read passage by passage. The words in the Readers' Digest were used in particular contexts and these were not used in everyday conversation. The tutor whose monthly salary was \$200 came five times a week. Cain did not need to submit homework. Thus, his comprehension was better than writing.

Some years later, Cain had studied a part-time certificate course in social service in the Hong Kong Polytechnic but he did not complete the course. Instead, he learned massage.

As for David, he self-studied the subjects of the Hong Kong Certificate of education Examinations and he got good results. Afterwards, he studied a part-time theology course. Upon completion of the course, he has become a part-time preacher.

In this chapter, I have presented the education and the training of the four blind activists in relation to their career development and interpretation of reality. In the next chapter, I will give a description of their participation in and withdrawal from the self-help movement of the blind after graduation from the school.

Note

1. Jesus was quoted in Matthew (15:13-14), "... Every plant which my heavenly father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

Chapter 8 - The activists and the self-help movement of the blind

In the last two chapters, we have seen the four blind activists' changing interpretations of reality from the onset of blindness in their pre-school years to their graduation from a school for the blind in their early adulthood. In this chapter, I am going to examine their life spans ranging from their participation in to their withdrawal from the self-help movement of the blind in the light of the meanings that blindness had for them. This included everything related to blindness that they might note in their worlds - mobility, volunteers, service agencies, guiding ideals and self-help movement of the blind. Their life experiences regarding their collective actions of the blind will be illuminated throughout the chapter.

8.1 Embarkation of the self-help movement of the blind

In this section, let us see why and how the four blind activists launched the self-help movement of the blind which was started in 1964. Adam and Bill were involved in the founding of the Hong Kong Blind Friends' Club (HKBFC) whereas Cain and David became active members of HKBFC several years later.

Adam took the initiative in establishing an organization formed and run by the blind. He believed that the sighted could not fully understand the blind and that an organization of the blind should make every endeavour to help the blind.

"The Head of the Saint John Hospital told me (Adam) to take part in a Christmas party for the blind held at the Southorn Playground. In addition to the performance programmes, the participants were given presents. This function was meaningless because it was charitable in nature. The participants were treated like beggars. The dignity of the blind was violated. This was why I was determined to set up a self-help organization of the blind. No one understands ourselves (the blind) better than we; no one cares ourselves more than we. Thus, it has been my hope that HKBFC/HKAB (HKBFC was renamed Hong Kong Association of the Blind 'HKAB' in 1974) can assist our members as much as it can and that they should be treated as members of a big family."

The above disappointment and hope had motivated Adam to found HKBFC. After having obtained a job, Adam concentrated on soliciting support for establishing an organization of the blind. The support came from his former schoolmates, Mr. Leung of the Ebenezer, Ms. Smith of the Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB), some expatriates and some of his family members.

Adam returned to the Ebenezer to enlist organizing committee members. Some students, response was very encouraging, while others were apathetic. Some blind people who were not educated in the Ebenezer or had never received education were also invited by Adam to be members of the organizing committee.

Regarding the knowledge, techniques and resources to set up and run an organization, Ms. Smith of HKSB introduced Adam her friends who assisted the organizing committee, for example, in translation of the constitution of HKBFC. Among them were Father John Collins and a lecturer's wife.

The founding of HKBFC was not without hindrance. In finding premises of HKBFC, Adam wanted to establish its base in the Factory for the Blind. However, the response from the Manager of the Factory was negative. "The Manager came to my (Adam's) workplace and dissuaded me from setting up HKBFC in the Factory. Instead, he persuaded me to organize activities for the workers. I turned down his suggestion and I looked for another place to be the base of HKBFC."

To set up an organization in Hong Kong in the 1960's was not an easy task. Under the Societies Ordinance, all organizations must be registered with the Registrar of Societies. As Adam could not use braille to complete the

registration form, Adam's brother-in-law helped him to fill in the form. However, it was returned to him several times because of incorrect or incomplete information. Finally, an officer for the Registrar of Societies read aloud the filled-in information to him for clarification. The application was ultimately approved and HKBFC was founded on 14 September 1964.

Bill only gave advice to the organizers but did not join the organizing committee. Later, Bill was elected to be a member of the first executive committee of HKBFC. Cain joined HKBFC in 1966. In weekday evenings and Saturday afternoons, he went to the premises of HKBFC located at the rooftop of Block 33, Wong Tai Sin Estate, where he met other blind friends and talked with them. As a result of regular travelling practice (for social activities and job training), his mobility skills were improved and his self-confidence was enhanced. He remembered several minor accidents well in which he fell into the drainage around the building in which the premises of HKBFC was situated. He became an executive committee member in 1968 after he had found a job.

Through a similar process undergone by Cain, David became an active member of HKBFC at about the same time. Both of them were familiar with the founders of HKBFC. They became the successors of the founders in the mid-1970's.

8.2 Commitment to the self-help movement of the blind

In this section, we are going to see what the four blind activists had come through as active members of HKBFC/HKAB and what reflections on these experiences they had some years later. These experiences, which had been shaped by their previous interpretation of reality, were related to their social interaction with the blind and the sighted, the projects of the self-help movement of the blind, and the expansion and direction of HKBFC/HKAB.

8.2.1 *Enriching the social life of the blind*

As denoted by the name "Hong Kong Blind Friends, Club", its primary aim was to promote friendship among its members who acted towards one another in a spirit of unity. To achieve this, they organized indoor and outdoor activities to gather members together. Besides, they liked to go to the premises of HKBFC to chat, sing and play music during its opening hours. Its executive committee members were required to rotate on duty alternately. Those on duty had to open the door, prepare tea and provide musical instruments. In the outdoor activities, e.g. picnics, Adam took every opportunity to impart the principles of HKBFC (i.e. equality, independence and opportunity).

The above activities were well received. Two church organizations were also aware of this need and therefore they

set up their own social centers for the blind in the same period (see chapter 1). However, HKBFC attracted more blind people than the social centers of the church. HKBFC was more than the alumni of the Ebenezer. Its membership covered graduates of another school for blind girls, the adventitiously blind and the non-educated blind. This shows that the blind, previously scattered and divided, had a need of organizational affiliation.

Cain said that some blind people who did not join HKBFC did not know how to communicate with the sighted. They were self-centered and unable to adapt themselves to society. Their table manners were not acceptable in the sighted world. They put both hands in front of themselves for protection while walking. Perhaps, the blind could learn how to interact with the sighted in HKBFC's activities which were joined by sighted volunteers.

8.2.2 *Soliciting outside support*

Human and financial resources were essential for the operation and the development of HKBFC. Thus, the blind activists recruited volunteers and were in touch with some philanthropists' clubs. As a result, they extended their social network and made friends with some sighted people.

The blind activists were grateful to the sighted

volunteers for their assistance. Sometimes, they were very familiar with each other. For example, Adam's wife was a volunteer who came to Adam's cognizance in HKBFC. A barrister was invited to be the honorary president of HKBFC. Bill said, "The volunteers, such as students of tertiary education institutions and social workers of the Caritas, were very nice and helpful". Bill introduced some of his sighted friends to the Ebenezer as god mothers, who gave assistance to the newly baptised students.

In order to obtain financial support, the blind activists established a social network with philanthropists. They presented their needs in the luncheons of philanthropists' groups, such as the Lion Clubs. These groups were usually formed by foreigners. It was one of the reasons why the blind activists considered English very important.

8.2.3 *Confronting the dominant ideology in the field of blindness*

As mentioned in chapter 1, the services for the blind in Hong Kong was started by the missionary and then consolidated and expanded by the Government through a statutory body (i.e. HKSB), special bureaus (e.g. the Special Education Section of the Education Department, the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department and the Rehabilitation Division of the Health and Welfare Branch) and subvented voluntary agencies.

At the beginning of the formation of this framework, the blind had no voice and power. It was under this condition that the blind of the early post-Second World War period had grown up and received education and job training. After the founding of HKBFC in 1964, the ideas of independence, self-help and the rejection of handicapping stereotypes have been promoted by the blind activists. The following are some experiences of the blind activists with the dominant ideology in the field of blindness. This ideology which originated from the medical and charitable perspectives stresses that the professionals know the needs of the blind and that the blind are nothing more than recipients of service. More than this, the dominant ideology does not recognize the ability of the blind and the value of their participation in the formulation and implementation of the policies concerning the blind. No doubt, the service agencies and the Government departments concerned are often in conflict with the self-help organizations of the blind.

From 1972 to 1976, David worked as Assistant Superintendent in the Hostel of HKSB. The reason for his appointment, he said, might be due to the fact that he was then the President of HKBFC/HKAB. The Director of HKSB wanted him to persuade HKBFC/HKAB's executive committee to co-operate with HKSB.

In 1974, the Hong Kong Blind Friends' Club was renamed the Hong Kong Association of the Blind. The new name was more in line with its objectives, that is, 'independence of the blind' and 'creating opportunities for the blind other than recreation and social activities'. However, the Director of HKSB persuaded David not to rename HKBFC and promised to donate presents to its Christmas party. This was refused by David and he resigned from the post in HKSB. This incident was similar to that occurred ten years ago, in which Adam rejected the suggestion of the Manager of the Factory of HKSB that Adam should only concentrate on organizing recreational activities for the blind workers.

Until now, these two organizations hold different and opposing views on the services for the blind. More than this, the blind activists, after having attended an international conference (which will be mentioned later), used the concepts 'of the blind' and 'for the blind' in analysing the difference between self-help groups of the blind and service agencies for the blind.

8.2.4 *The disruptive force of HKBFC*

In the early 1970's, another self-help organization of the blind was founded after the strike of blind workers in 1971. Then, the workers of the Factory of HKSB were not satisfied with the wage level and the management of the

Factory, so they protested and staged a strike. Some students and trade union activists supported the workers. However, the executive committee of HKBFC did not give direct support to the workers. After the strike, some leaders of the strike felt a need to form another organization of the blind. As a result, they established the Hong Kong Federation of the Blind (HKFB) in 1972. Had HKBFC involved itself to support the workers, perhaps there would not have been a division within the blind community (Foo, 1985). The leaders of HKFB were regarded as less educated and conservative. They represented the interests of older blind people who had not received formal schooling.

According to Adam, there were two factors accounting for the inception of HKFB. Firstly, the strike was encouraged and manipulated by some social workers who were in favour of progressive actions. The blind leaders of the strike had sought help from Adam, the then President of HKBFC, but they held different views. Adam thought that the grievances of the workers should be dressed to the top management of the Factory whereas the strike leaders chose to rely on the social workers who advocated progressive actions, such as sit-in, demonstration and hunger strike. Secondly, a music training institute for the blind was disorganized and part of its assets was donated to the strike leaders for the purpose of forming another organization of the blind.

"At that time, I (Adam) believed that if we staged progressive actions, society might not support us. We could not lose public support in employment and education. We had to give a good impression to the general public but the trade union leaders preferred struggle to negotiation."

Cain did not agree with Adam's strategy in the strike. In talking about the strike of the blind workers, Cain said that without progressive actions the improvement of the situation of the blind would not have been possible. For example, he launched a campaign on the road safety of the blind in 1981. He mobilized members and volunteers of HKAB to put stickers on illegal parking vehicles. According to him, without arousing the awareness of the public, no one would know the transport needs of the blind.

To Bill, one of the most memorable incidents was this strike. The arrangement for financial assistance for the workers was made with the Caritas but Bill was criticised for the payment method. He suggested workers with more dependants should be given more money whereas others considered that all workers should be paid the same amount of money. Bill was outspoken, but criticisms made him disappointed.

HKFB absorbed older and less educated members. Though an effort was made to unite the two self-help groups of the blind

in the early 1980's, it was unsuccessful. HKAB has been taking lead of the self-help movement of the blind because it excels HKFB in the number, education level and commitment of members.

8.2.5 *Innovative projects*

After the founding of HKBFC, the blind activists began to participate in the definition of the needs of the blind. They launched a number of pilot projects which were later introduced to the Government and the public. The following are some examples.

The first example was a survey on the transport needs of the blind, which was jointly conducted by HKBFC and the University of Hong Kong. A seminar was held after the survey but the response was unsatisfactory. Bill was very disappointed because he was in charge of the survey.

The second example of innovative work was the set up of a talking book library which later became a resource centre for blind students. Initially, students of the Baptist College recorded books on tapes. It was primarily educative in nature. With this support, the blind graduates of schools for the blind could continue their studies in night schools. In 1972, HKBFC set up an education resource centre for the provision of volunteer readers and technical aids. Thus, many

blind youths were able to study in ordinary secondary schools.

8.2.6 *International contact*

David and Cain attended an international conference in Berlin, Germany, in 1974 and afterwards they introduced the experience of the self-help movement of the blind in Europe and North America to HKAB. David knew this conference from a foreign braille magazine. Before attending the conference, an English press release was prepared. When they were on the way from Germany to Hong Kong via London, they despatched the release to the newspaper agencies. In the years that followed, HKAB has been active in the international affairs. For instance, it has joined the World Blind Union and the International Council for Education of the Visually Impaired. More recently, it has also established relationship with the organizations for the blind in China.

8.2.7 *Systematization and expansion*

Since its establishment, HKBFC/HKAB has undergone its expansion in terms of membership, organization and staffing. All affairs have gradually been arranged according to an organized system. For instance, Cain was responsible for introducing membership registration form in 1968. Members' personal information (such as cause of blindness, level of education, type of occupation, etc.) were recorded for statistical and planning purpose. Cain was proud of his

contribution in this aspect.

The affairs of HKBFC/HKAB were diverse in nature. The blind activists promoted the rights of blind persons, carry out consciousness-raising campaigns, conduct public education campaigns, carry out research to identify their needs, make recommendations to Government on policy matters, and express their views to service organizations. In order to promote awareness of the needs of the blind and improve on service delivery, ad hoc groups were formed and members were mobilized.

There had also been a corresponding increase in the number of staff members. Even a significant number of its staff were its members. Cain was employed as the executive secretary for several years in the late 1980's. His working experience as a staff member will be mentioned later. Although a lot of work can be carried out by the staff, Bill missed the days during which there was no staff support. At that time, he had a stronger sense of commitment.

8.3 Withdrawal from the self-help movement of the blind

8.3.1 *Reasons for withdrawal*

Adam and Bill stepped down from the executive committee of HKBFC in the early 1970's after having got married, whereas

David and Cain became inactive in the 1980's for different reasons.

Adam had joined the executive committee again in the late 1980's. However, he was not satisfied with the functioning of HKAB. As a result, he resigned before his term of office expired. Adam said, "I don't say that any request from the blind should be entertained. We should deal with it with considerate care. we should not reject their requests at the first instance. I told the staff of HKAB that they made requests because they could not solve their problems by themselves. HKAB should do what individual blind persons could not do. This was why we established HKBFC. It does not matter whether we could help them but it is important whether we have tried to help them. For example, it is difficult for a blind person to find a job. Employers are unwilling to give an interview to an individual with visual impairment. However, if they are referred and supported by an organization, employers may be more willing to give an interview and then you can persuade themselves to employ blind people. Similarly, an individual blind person is difficult to find a school place by himself. An organization of the blind can speak and act something on behalf of the blind." Obviously, Adam felt that the bureaucratization of HKAB could not adequately care the needs of its members. He felt powerless so he resigned from the executive committee.

Though Bill was no longer active, he missed what he did during the term of his service in HKBFC. "In 1967, though there might be bombs in streets or bad weather, I still went to HKBFC on duty. I contributed my time, money and energy. In spite of this, I enjoyed it very much. Then, I wanted to achieve something. However, it ended up with many criticisms. Now, I see no reason why members of HKAB are unwilling to pay more membership fees (now \$10 per annum). They enjoy everything but contribute nothing. Did they know the spirit of HKAB, that is, 'Self-help of the blind'."

Cain served HKBFC/HKAB for a longer time because his housemaid took care of his two children. His children joined with him in many activities of HKAB. "They (Cain's children) appreciated my (Cain's) work in HKAB and were familiar with the blind."

Cain's withdrawal from the self-help movement of the blind resulted from the experience as a paid staff in HKAB. In the mid-1980's, he heard some of his workmates said that the telephone switchboard could have been updated if there had not been a blind operator. In addition, whenever he was absent from duty, the operation of the telephones in his workplace was not affected. This made him feel a sense of uselessness. As a result, he quitted the job of telephone operator and then became a paid staff in HKAB. However, he

felt difficult to cope with the divergent demands from different executive committee members who were elected biannually. Finally, he resigned for two reasons. First, he concentrated on members' personal problems while the executive committee required him to do more work relating to personnel management. Second, the executive committee wanted him to do more paperwork but he was unable to perform it well. He resigned in 1990. The working experience as a staff in HKAB did affect his enthusiasm in HKAB. However, he thought that democracy required the voters to obey the elected who had the power to run HKAB during their terms of office.

David's withdrawal from the self-help movement of the blind was due to his dissatisfaction with the new leaders. Cain sighed that David and the new president of HKAB were former close comrades. However, their relationship was worsening. He added that after having got working experience in society, the value judgment of a person may change. Cain means that friendship as well as worldviews may change with the passage of time.

8.3.2 *Present situation*

Adam was outgoing and outspoken. He joined a cyclists' club and a physically handicapped and able-bodied volunteers' group of his church. He also joined some music societies. In reply to the question of why he participated in so many social

organisations, he said that perhaps he liked to express opinions so other people invited him to join with them.

Adam has a wide network of social contact developed from settling in Cheung Chau in the 1950's, through schooling in the Ebenezer, to launching the self-help movement of the blind. "I (Adam) have a rich experience which has helped me in communication with other people."

Despite his busy life, Adam did housework, including washing clothes, buying food and cooking. He is satisfied with his life.

After withdrawing from the self-help movement of the blind, Bill's focus was on his family. His wife and he tried their best to help the growth of their two sons. Bill admitted there were problems in teaching them when they were very young. For example, in their early childhood, they always asked whatever they saw, but Bill could not see the things they wanted to know. "There was difficulty in teaching my two sons. My elder son is 22 months older than the second son. I used tape-recorder to assist them to practise dictation. I would not demand them to have outstanding results. I hope they will not be the liability of society." Their elder son is now studying in a university and the younger son in the senior secondary class.

Bill has more time now and has joined a Chinese music group of HKAB. "I (Bill) am frank and outspoken but others considered me proud. Now, though I am a new member of the Chinese music group of HKAB but I had no reservation to express my opinions."

Since the resignation from the paid job of HKAB, Cain invested his saving in a studio company and took up the post of executive director. He had been a member of the mutual aid committee of the building where he lives. He is now taking up the job of massage.

From 1977 to 1981, David studied a theology course. He is a part-time preacher. Between 1987 and 1988 he taught Bible classes in the Ebenezer. He also served the Christian Ministry to the Visually Impaired. To compare him with the other three blind activists, he is more active in the affairs of the blind.

We have had a look at the life spans of the four blind activists in the self-help movement of the blind. In the next chapter, I am going to examine two questions: First, is the participation in the self-help movement of the blind or any other acts described above can be regarded as empowerment? Second, to what extent can we say the commitment to the self-help movement of the blind was the result of education?

Chapter 9

Education and empowerment

The foregoing four chapters contain the description of the life experiences of the four blind social activists from the onset of their blindness to their withdrawal from the self-help movement of the blind, providing a basis for the analysis of their interpretation of reality, the elucidation of their collective actions and the evaluation of the role of education in empowering themselves. The first three sections of this concluding chapter aim to achieve these three objectives. The first section is an attempt to analyse their interpretation of reality in terms of their relationship with the physical environment and the social world leading to their self-understanding of the experiences of suffering and the meanings of blindness. The second section is a discussion on the nature and direction of the collective actions taken by the blind activists against the existing reality. It will also touch upon the question of whether these collective actions are empowered actions of the blind activists. Section three evaluates the role of education in empowering the blind activists from the angle of the internal forces of education. In the last section of the chapter, the rethinking of the concepts concerned, as well as the limitations of the study, are mentioned. This is to provide directions for further

research on the education and empowerment of people with socially disadvantaged background.

9.1 Analysis of interpretation of reality of the blind activists

This section analyses the blind activists' interpretation of reality in the context of their relationship with the physical environment, with other people, and with the social institutions before they participated in the self-help movement of the blind. These lived experiences shaped their self-understanding of the meanings of blindness and to a certain extent motivated themselves to take collective actions against the reality.

9.1.1 *The relationship with the physical environment*

Blindness is a cause of limitations and demands adjustment because the blind must live in a society in which sight plays a dominant role. Therefore, the lack of vision makes it necessary to employ the other senses, particularly touch and hearing, in recognizing certain things and moving about. Besides, the assistance of other people and certain adaptations in equipment and skills are essential to their personal development (Lowenfeld, 1981, p.29).

The blind activists learned something from their family members and playmates in their pre-school social environment.

The access to and the availability of these human resources plays an important role in helping them cope with the physical world and mix with other people. Adam, Bill and David had some common activities, namely games, with their playmates. As a result, Adam had confidence to assume the role of an eldest son by rendering contribution to his family. On the contrary, under the protection of his housemaid, Cain described himself as knowing nothing and having no playmates in his pre-school years.

Regarding what they learned in the Ebenezer, the blind activists emphasized the importance of braille, English and typing. For them, braille is a means to know more about the world. Hence, David liked reading foreign braille magazines from which he made pen pals and knew the general knowledge of the world as well as the international affairs of the blind. English together with typing is useful in their employment and education. To find a job of telephone operator, they were required to speak fluent English. A good command of English was also beneficial for their further studies. It was why Adam and Bill attended English class in night schools. It was also why Cain's mother hired a tutor to teach him English. Typing was a direct way of communication with the sighted. They could hand in their typed answers to sighted teachers. In the aspect of mobility, to meet the need of vocational training and social gathering, they had already been familiar

with the use of cane in getting about before they got a job and became active members of HKBFC.

Apparently, with the acquisition of the above adaptations in equipment and skills and the guidance of other people, the blind activists should be able to live independently and freely to cope with the physical world. However, in their relationships with other people and social institutions, they were told that they were unable or prohibited to do many things because of their blindness. This will be the focus of the next two sub-sections.

9.1.2 The relationship with other people

With respect to the psychological effects of blindness, Lowenfeld (1981, p.33) states that it is generally agreed in the field of psychology that "Blind children do not show emotional disturbances because of their blindness as such. However, since they grow up and live in a world geared to the needs and sensory equipment of seeing people, they are confronted with a great many difficulties which may cause more or less severe emotional disturbances." The findings of this study have confirmed this view. The four blind activists emphasized the impact of the reactions of other people to themselves as blind people, rather than solely the personal factors, on the emotional and psychological reactions to blindness. The following four continuums of feelings in

relation to the meanings of blindness have been revealed in their interpretation of reality during their social interaction with the sighted.

The first message about blindness conveyed to the blind activists in their social interaction with the sighted was that the blind are unable to do many things taken for granted by the sighted and are able to do few things within the stereotyped imagination of the sighted. Adam was often told by his parents that he had picked up a banknote on the road before being blinded but he could not do so any longer. Despite the fact that Adam attended the learning commencement ceremony with his younger brothers, he was unable to go to school afterwards. David's parents hoped that he could be a teacher in the Ebenezer, but he hoped to be a priest. Ultimately, all of the blind activists received telephony training under arrangement or on voluntary basis, though some of them learned other skills and changed their jobs some years later. It seemed that they had to walk on this socially constructed path beyond which they were forbidden or discouraged to go.

The second continuum in relation to the meaning of blindness is friendship-enmity. When Bill played with his playmates, some of them called him "Blind boy" and made him angry, although other children would help resolve the dispute.

At the same time, a playmate who gave Bill a feeling of friendship was deep in Bill's memory. This playmate accepted Bill and was willing to share some school experience with him. In another extreme case, David's hospitalisation at the age of eight resulted in a nurse adding insult to his arm injury. Hence, hostility relating to blindness was deep in David's mind. Actually, lying between the two extremes - total acceptance and total rejection - are manifestations of a variety of social attitudes towards blindness, including sympathy, charity, pity, prejudice, ignorance and fear of blindness. The activists clearly knew that it was attributable to their blindness. They encountered these attitudes towards blindness in their social interaction with family members, neighbours, schoolmates, teachers, housemothers, visitors, missionaries and expatriates.

The third continuum is concerned with equality and inequality. For the blind activists, inequality existed everywhere because it could be found between the sighted and the blind as well as between the totally blind and the low-visioned. Of course, they experienced the inequalities arising from sex difference and poverty during the days in the Ebenezer. Nevertheless, they thought that the inequalities in the form of inhuman and unfair treatments on the basis of one's characteristic were unacceptable and harmful. As pointed out by Adam, the trainees of the handicraft class of

HKSB were often scolded and badly treated by the instructors. Adam further commented that the blind were often regarded by the sighted as second-class citizens. Naturally, equality has become the first goal of the self-help movement.

The fourth continuum is understanding-misunderstanding. Initially, the four blind activists were not happy with the negative attitudes of the sighted towards themselves. Later, with more and more social interaction with the sighted, particularly volunteers who supported the self-help movement of the blind, the blind activists concluded that many inappropriate reactions of the sighted to the blind are caused by misunderstanding of the sighted about the blind. As stated by Adam, "Some sighted teachers of the Ebenezer thought the blind knew nothing. Also, the staff of the North Point Refugee Camp and the instructors of HKSB adopted an unnatural attitude towards us. Even though they did not give commands, they talked loudly to us, intentionally raising their voice to ensure they are heard. Of course, not every sighted person adopts this attitude which I think unnatural, for example, the volunteers who are familiar with us." It came as no surprise that Adam came to the conclusion that "No one understands the blind better than the blind; no one cares themselves more than they." This is the basic belief of the activists in the self-help movement of the blind. They also believe that more contact between the sighted and the blind and more publicity

campaigns can enhance the understanding of the public about blindness and the blind.

In interpreting the meanings of blindness, the above four continuums operate as yardsticks for the blind to understand their reality, that is, what being blind in the seeing world is like. With these yardsticks, they might be aware of some forces which had determined what they could do, with whom they could contact, where their misfortune came from and who defined their needs. In addition to the physical and social problems, the blind activists' self-understanding of the meanings of blindness was deepened and stimulated by the institutional barriers.

9.1.3 *The relationship with the social institutions*

Berger and Luckmann (1971, Ch.1) consider that objective reality has come into existence through institutionalisation and legitimation of human activities. Institutions (e.g. schools and families), roles (e.g. teachers and students) and symbols (e.g. languages and signs) are objectivations of subjective reality. Social interaction among human beings is guided by these objectivated objects. From this perspective, social interaction between the sighted and the blind is guided by the social institutions together with the social attitudes towards the blind.

Up to the 1960's, the education and welfare of the blind were left almost entirely to special Government departments, special schools and special welfare agencies. These institutions were operated by bureaucrats, missionaries and workers in the field of blindness without the participation of the blind. These social institutions delimited the career development and social conditions of the blind. Basically, the socially constructed and politically disadvantaged status of the blind was reaffirmed by these social institutions.

For example, in the institution of education, the blind were sent to special schools which were under the supervision of the Special Education Section of the Education Department. When they were about to leave the school, they were arranged to receive job training as telephone operators, masseurs or piano tuners. Likewise, in the area of social and recreational activities, two special social centers were set up by the religious bodies to provide special recreational activities for the blind. A special factory for the blind and a special hostel for the blind were set up by HKSB to provide sheltered employment opportunities and boarding places in the 1960's. All these institutions which were under the control of the sighted stressed the special needs of the blind. It was considered that the best way to solve the problems of the blind was to segregate the blind from the sighted, under which condition special services were provided by the specially

trained professionals. For people who have lost their sight, they experience this stigmatizing process in the special institutions, in addition to the numerous causes of feelings of inferiority, hopelessness, and depression (Goffman, 1963). Dodds (1993) argued that it may mark a person as a member of a disadvantaged minority group and that societal stereotypes of such a group cause negative expectations in those who find themselves members of it.

Initially, the blind activists followed the institutional arrangements. However, the feelings of uneasiness made them aware of the oppressive reality. Being blind in the world, they had a variety of experiences in different social settings at different time. They were treated as victims at the onset of blindness. They were treated as patients when they were under the care and protection of their parents and carers. They were treated as clients by special social institutions when they received vocational training. They were treated as second-class citizens in society when they used the social facilities. These are the steps in their self-understanding of the experience of suffering and affliction.

These experiences enhanced their social understanding. Social understanding is the knowledge that enables a person to understand, interpret, and take appropriate actions that are relevant to different social settings and personal situations

(Greenspan, 1979). It provides the basis for formulating strategies for solving problems, perspective taking, and social inferences.

As recalled by Adam, "My harsh life has enriched my life experience. My life experience has influenced my worldview." In perceiving the difference between the sighted and the blind, the blind activists would discover a minority-group status. As a result, they have a sense of marginality, incompetence, inferiority and devaluation. They have to combat negative images of the blind. For Adam, the breakthroughs of which he was proud had to be opened up and trodden.

When the blind activists formed their self-help organization, they believed that the blind themselves were in the best position to know what blind people needed. They should organize themselves into a self-help group and promoted the well-being of the blind (HKAB, 1979). The following section is the elaboration of the goals of the self-help movement of the blind as well as an account of the collective actions taken by the blind activists to improve the situation of the blind.

9.2 Collective actions against the reality

In this study, empowerment is not measured by input and

process standards of education. Instead, empowerment is seen through the interpretation of reality and the collective actions of the educated blind activists against the oppressive elements of the reality. These actions will be examined alongside of the three goals of HKAB of which the four blind activists under study were active members.

9.2.1 *The goals of the collective actions*

HKAB has three goals, namely 'equality', 'independence' and 'opportunities' (the rejection of handicapping conditions) of the blind (HKAB, 1985, p.2).

The first goal is 'equality'. It is the key to social integration. As defined by Lowenfeld (1981, p.133), integration is "The mutual acceptance, based on equality of opportunity and before the law, between groups which differ in some important characteristic, may it be racial, religious, physical or otherwise." For the blind activists, equality has a dual meaning. On the one hand, they stressed the worth of the blind as human beings. They wanted the blind to be treated like normal human beings. It was the assertion of the blind as human beings. On the other hand, they also protected the right to be different. They explained that society as a whole was formed by people with different characteristics. A characteristic (e.g. blindness) has its limitation. It has nothing to do with one's worth.

The second goal of the self-help movement of the blind is 'independence'. It represents the hope of the blind for liberation from the domination of the sighted. It has two senses. In the first sense, they emphasize the necessity of the self-help of the blind. They think that the blind are their best problem solvers. In overcoming their problems, they want to be independent of the sighted. In the second sense, they stress the mutual help among the blind. They know clearly the need for unity of the blind in their self-help movement.

The third goal of the self-help movement of the blind is 'opportunity'. It aims at improving the situation of the blind and developing the potentialities of the blind. In so doing, they have to overcome the physical, social and institutional barriers mentioned in section 9.1.

The underlying motive of the above three goals is to change the socially constructed and politically disadvantaged status of the blind. The blind activists wanted to re-interpret their reality. Their ideal society is a society planned and designed to suit all citizens. That is, both the blind and the sighted are given the same chances and choices to exercise their rights in all aspects of society. This motive has played an important role in the self-help movement of the blind. David commented on the concept of a society for

all in the following way:

"We human beings are all different. We have different needs and different qualifications, different strengths and different weaknesses. Therefore, the society in which we all live, must never be formed on the basis of special demands by a few. The society must be formed in such a way that it will suit everyone. The needs of the blind must influence the planning of our society as much as the needs of the sighted, not because our society must pay special attention to the blind, but because the blind are citizens of the society like everyone else. Thus, the needs of the blind must be included in the building of the society as a matter of course."

To sum up, the call for a self-help movement of the blind is to seek political goals and brings their voices into public discourse over blindness in order to establish the rights of the blind. To achieve this, the blind activists had taken a variety of collective actions which have been mentioned in chapter 8 in general and will be discussed specifically in terms of the types of the barriers faced by the blind in the next sub-section.

9.2.2 Collective actions to remove barriers

The blind activists had committed themselves in the wide range of activities concerning blind people's well-being. They had been involving in overcoming the physical, social and institutional barriers faced by the blind. At the same time, they also launched and participated in a number of consciousness-raising activities in order to promote the unity of the blind. They realised that to foster changes in consciousness of the blind would ultimately improve the

situation of the blind. These activities showed their effort to redefine their reality.

In overcoming the physical barriers, the blind activists organized activities and provided services for the blind. Three months after the founding of HKBFC, they organized Hong Kong's first self-managed outdoor recreational function of the blind. Later, the first open singing contest for the blind in Hong Kong was held. These activities enriched the traditional social life of the blind. In creating educational opportunities, because of the lack of assistance for the blind adults in pursuit of further studies, the blind activists started such assistance which took 3 main forms: Effort to find suitable places in ordinary evening schools; the loan of equipment, such as brailers, typewriters and tape-recorders; and to arrange volunteer readers. In addition, in order to solve the problem of the shortage of braille books, they established Hong Kong's first talking book library and transcribed an English-Chinese dictionary into braille. In the aspect of employment, efforts were also made in job placement for blind people in ordinary factories. To assist blind parents to tutor their sighted children, tape recording and braille transcription of textbooks were provided. A fund was established to provide interest-free loans for HKAB's members having financial difficulties. A pilot project on provision of services for the aged blind was launched. To

keep up with the technological development, a computer group was set up (HKAB, 1985).

To operate the above activities and services, the blind activists had to look for human and material support outside HKBFC/HKAB. Hence, they had constant contact with missionaries, expatriates, tertiary students and other volunteers. Later, they even joined force with people with other disabilities on some occasions. As a result, mutual understanding and acceptance between HKAB and these groups were enhanced (HKAB, 1985).

Regarding the general public, films on the conditions of the blind were produced in order to correct their attitudes toward the blind. Publicity materials were produced. For example, HKAB published a booklet 'A Hope in the Young Generation' to urge the Government to include knowledge about the blind in the curricula in primary and secondary schools. To encourage the cooperation between the blind and the sighted, a project for the aged in a resettlement area, joined between HKAB and the Hong Kong Red Cross Youth, won an award (HKAB, 1985).

In order to change the undesirable institutional arrangements, the blind activists had been involving in both 'Participation-against' (Rose, 1975, p.63) inappropriate or

inadequate services through demonstration, press conference, etc. and 'Participation-in' (Rose, 1975, p.63) the planning process through their representation in various governmental and non-governmental committees. Working groups on specific issues concerning the blind were formed within HKAB for making recommendations to the Government. HKAB became a member agency of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service in 1980. Some active members, e.g. Cain and David, were appointed to sit on the Rehabilitation Development Co-ordinating Committee of the Government.

Apart from the outside support, the blind activists realised the importance of the unity and support of the blind themselves. In the international conferences, the blind activists learned the conditions of the blind in other countries. They also learned the philosophy and strategies of the self-help movement of the blind in Western countries. In order to promote the unity of the blind, the blind activists had to let its members know HKAB represented the blind. Thus, they used braille quarterly magazine, bi-monthly talking magazine, hotline announcement and monthly newsletter to raise members' awareness and keep them informed of the work of HKAB. Yet, HKAB has become much more complicated in terms of both its larger membership and wider commitment.

Looking back into the collective actions carried out by

the blind activists, they were in position to redefine the situation of the blind. Apart from doing their best to promote the education, occupation, welfare and recreation of the blind, they had also simultaneously made strenuous effort to rectify the community's unfavourable traditional attitude towards the blind. In the course of this, David identified the following notable problems still encountered by HKAB: "First, the belief of some people that we blind people should sit aside and wait passively for their help. This belief has led them to resist our work of participation. Second, the failure of many to fully understand our potential and abilities. Third, the misunderstanding on the part of many that HKAB is a mere voluntary organization providing recreational activities and facilities for the blind. Fourth, many people (including some blind people) still deny the equal human rights of the blind." These problems must be tackled by the successors of the four blind activists after the 1970's.

Having examined the goals and the collective actions of the self-help movement of the blind in which the blind activists had taken part, the question that follows is whether empowerment of the blind activists can be revealed in these goals and collective actions. According to the definition of empowerment in chapter 4, empowerment refers to the ability of oneself to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive

elements of reality. Based on this definition, the answer is affirmative. Obviously, empowerment can mean the difference between a life of dependence and a life of pursuing equality, independence and productivity. Another important question that follows is what role education plays in empowerment.

9.3 The role of education in empowerment

I consider the role of education in empowerment from the angle of the inner forces within the school. Whether the students can be empowered by education is closely related to the internal operation of the school (i.e. provision of characteristic-specific prerequisites, transmission of school knowledge and school social interaction), all of which are intrinsic aspects of education. These aspects provide a foundation and a framework on which one can acquire knowledge, skills and values. In addition to the intrinsic aspects, the role of education in empowerment also depends on the support and influence of the Government, the family and the community which offer education orientation, participation and responsibilities. Both of these forces affect the interpretation of reality of the students in addition to the knowledge, skills and values they acquire from schooling. However, this study only focuses on the inner forces of education.

9.3.1 *Characteristic-specific prerequisites*

It is important to provide characteristic-specific prerequisites to overcome students' problems arising from their racial, cultural, religious or physical characteristic. For example, students with blindness may learn less effectively because they require hands-on experiences, adapted media, and blindness-specific skills. Hence, to provide them with prerequisites to overcome their learning problems arising from blindness is essential for their academic and social development. In the case of the blind activists, when they started their schooling, they learned braille reading and writing skills as well as creating and using raised-line drawings and maps without which learning would be difficult for them.

The inadequacy of prerequisites would have far-reaching effects. For example, the difference between Chinese braille and Chinese characters and the lack of braille books affected the blind activists' expectations for further studies and career development as well as their perception of the role of the blind in the seeing world. After graduation from the school, they still attended some English course. To them, it was easier and more convenient to learn English rather than other school subjects in ordinary schools. Moreover, in their view, sufficient supply of braille books is one of the effective means to solve the learning problems of the blind because they had suffered from the lack of braille books

during their schooling. It was why they had dedicated to providing braille reading materials to the adult blind.

To provide such prerequisites does not mean to separate those with specific characteristics from their counterparts during the whole schooling process. With these prerequisites, David sat for public examinations. The blind activists pursued their further studies in evening school and seminary. Thus, the role of education in empowerment depends on whether it can provide unique, necessary, suitable and sufficient prerequisites for students to overcome their learning problems arising from their characteristics.

9.3.2 *Transmission of knowledge*

Regarding transmission of knowledge, I would like to mention two points for the discussion of the role of education in empowerment. The first point is concerned with the usefulness of the school subjects in helping students to climb the social ladder. The second point is about the value-oriented school knowledge which affect the value judgment of students.

With respect to the empowerment effect of education in terms of social mobility, English has been accorded high priority by the blind activists. English is a means to achieve upward social mobility in the British colony of Hong

Kong. In the case of the blind activists, English braille, unlike Cantonese braille, was connected with the written alphabets. The blind could use English typewriter in communication with the sighted. As mentioned before, a good command of English was required in their further studies and employment. To solicit outside support for HKAB, English helped them establish constructive relationship with the expatriates and missionaries.

Another school subject important for further studies was Science in the 1960's. However, it was cut in the Ebenezer. This reflected a decision by special educators that blind students would only benefit from non-Science education. Thus, it may delimit the life chances of the blind activists. To overcome this barrier was not an easy task. For example, after leaving the Ebenezer with Form 3 education in 1968, Steven Fung Hon-yuen worked as a telephone operator while trying to get into an ordinary school. With braille books borrowed from the Royal National Institute for the Blind in Britain, he gained two A-levels. Later, he became the first blind researcher to be awarded a doctor of science degree (SCMP, 1996, p. 3). From Fung's example, to overcome the restrictive effect of cutting Science, he had to turn to the braille science books and the education in Britain because Hong Kong was lack of such necessary conditions. We can see that the role of education in empowerment is closely related

to the transmission of the socially desirable knowledge.

Secondly, the value-oriented knowledge affect one's value judgment and self-awareness. However, the education provided in the Ebenezer in the 1960's was not designed to liberate the blind as advocated by Paulo Freire and other Resistance Theorists. For this reason, religious education played an important part in the moral development of the blind activists. under the religious influence in the Ebenezer, the blind activists learned some teachings of Christianity. Some of the messages were very appealing to them. At the same time, they recognized some contradictions in the Bible as well as the conflict between social values and Christian beliefs. They further understood that contradictions could be explained in favour of one side or the other. Religious knowledge to some degree affected their interpretation of reality because it stimulated them to reflect on the worth of human beings and the likelihood of the future. Here, the role of education in empowerment is to provide a value system to which the students can commit themselves or with which they can perceive the contradictions in society.

9.3.3 *School social interaction*

The third aspect of the inner forces of the school in empowerment is school social interaction. The people with whom the blind activists had social interaction in school

include superintendents, teachers, schoolmates as well as some outsiders. It represented different kinds of relationships and different kinds of interchanges. The meanings of blindness were derived from, or arising out of, these social relationships. These meanings were handled in, and modified through, the interpretative process used by the blind activists in dealing with the problems of blindness they encountered.

Superintendent is the Head of the school. The blind activists experienced different styles of leadership from several superintendents. One superintendent focused on personal development, allowing students to have every chance to improve themselves. The other superintendent was more pragmatic, defining the learning ability of the blind by adding Domestic Science and deleting Science. It was considered that the former style was enabling and the latter was restrictive for the blind. Paradoxically, as mentioned above, with diligence, Steven Fung, one of the graduates of the Ebenezer, was the first blind person to obtain a doctoral degree in physics in the world. The activists felt that their life had been pre-determined. Sometimes, they had a sense of powerlessness because their education could be changed by the leadership style of the superintendents. David was disappointed because he was unable to go to Taiwan for further studies. He had no choice but to receive the telephony

training.

In the presence of sighted teachers and other school staff, blind students would care their mannerisms. They knew that some mannerisms were not acceptable in the seeing world. Moreover, in the school social interaction, the blind learned how to respond to those with power. Besides, they observed that inequality could occur as a result of the judgment of teachers and housemothers based on the criteria of academic performance, appearance and degree of vision.

In the social interaction among schoolmates, they developed a special language by changing the pronunciation of a Cantonese phrase. This special language was used as an in-group language to assert group identity. If they spoke in this special language, they could assure that sighted passers-by would not understand what they were talking about. Thus, they had a sense of security. Most important of all, as a result of this group identity, schoolmates could be close comrades in the self-help movement of the blind and members of their self-help organization.

Besides, school outsiders provide students with an opportunity to face some social attitudes which may not be prominent inside school. In the case of the four blind activists, they did not like the visitors because they were

not willing to be observed like animals or prisoners; they were assisted by the expatriate volunteers but communication was difficult; some people adopted hostile attitudes towards the blind activists (e.g. in the incident of David's arm injury) though they had not yet prepared to face. Some years later, they realised that it was part of the social world. The contrast between outsiders and members of the school can be manifested in the four continuums of feelings mentioned in section 9.1.

From the above, the school social interaction that the students have can influence their perception of power, inequality and the socially desirable behaviour patterns. At the same time, sub-culture can be fostered among students with the same characteristic. They may have a common goal of transforming the reality if they are under the same oppressive situation. As in the case of the blind activists, they can be organized into a force to redefine their reality and transform society.

To conclude the role of education in empowerment, the above inner forces provided the blind activists with blindness-specific skills, with school knowledge and with an arena of social interaction. The process of schooling which places educational knowledge, values, and social relation within the context of complicated relations which are within

interplay of a variety of social attitudes towards the blind, may it be favourable or not. It helped to remove some problems arising from blindness and helped to strengthen themselves in coping with these problems. It did more to elevate their self-awareness through the contradictory values and contrasting social attitudes towards the blind. The school also provided a social environment for them, thereby furthering their interpretation of reality and the development of social skills needed. They developed the social skills and confidence to join the sighted community. On the other hand, it helped to foster a sub-culture which moulded their attitudes and behaviour which are constructive in their participation in the self-help movement of the blind.

9.4 Final remarks

In this final section, I would like to rethink the concepts concerned in the study in relation to the betterment of the blind as individuals and as a social group. Given the scope and the limitations of the study, some questions and insights put forward in the following discussion can certainly provide directions for further research on the education and empowerment of people with socially disadvantaged background.

9.4.1 *Have the blind benefited from social development?*

It is generally believed that the situation of the blind has improved since the 1950's. The harsh social conditions

have withered away and the following ways of living have emerged:

a) Reliance on social security allowances - instead of begging, the blind who are unemployed can apply for the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance.

b) Working in sheltered workshops - the working environment was restrictive.

c) Self-employment - most of the self-employed blind are hawkers and fortune tellers.

d) Open employment - the blind who are employed in the open market include telephone operators, social workers and a few other occupations. Recently, more and more blind masseurs have been trained by HKSB and employers are willing to employ them. Unlike the traditional occupations of the blind, they have their employers and co-workers.

Apparently, the conditions of the blind have improved because of the education and training provided as well as the available open employment opportunities. However, given the small proportion of the blind who are employed, can we say that the social conditions and the social status of the blind have improved? If so, are blind people better or worse than other socially disadvantaged groups as the result of socio-economic development? Has the oppression of the blind recycled itself in another form in the industrial and post-industrial society? Had there been no collective actions

of the blind to strive for their rights, would their situation have been worse? These questions will throw light for further research on the social status and empowerment of the blind.

9.4.2 *The forms of education and empowerment of the blind*

The four blind activists received education in a residential school for the blind in the 1950's and 1960's. They shared their schooling experiences when they were not with sighted students, but with other blind students. They said that the separate experience was valuable. It provided them with time with other blind children. It removed the pressure of performing in a classroom with all sighted students. It did more to elevate their self-esteem and social skills than did all the time they had with sighted peers. Residential schools for the blind may provide a more suitable environment for the blind child, thereby furthering individualisation and the development of special skills needed.

On the contrary, some of my blind friends, who received integrated education after completion of Form 3 in the Ebenezer in the 1970's and the 1980's, gave a compelling attack on the effects of being segregated in a school for the blind. Residential education segregates the blind from their families and community. There is always a risk of institutionalisation, which does not occur with integrated

education. They talked of their difficulties in adjusting to the sighted after their graduation from the school for the blind. They lacked the social skills and confidence to join the sighted in social gatherings. School for the blind, in their case, helped to foster a sub-culture which moulded their attitudes and behaviour which proved to be restrictive in their adult life. They talked about how they gradually developed into a 'normal' being in their further studies or work. The resources they gained in the institutions of the blind are restrictive in nature.

From the above, mixed with the sighted may not be beneficial for the blind as expected by some educators. It can be constructive as well as destructive. It may be a matter of timing. As mentioned by Bill, "The adults can express their sympathy and pity whereas children adopt in-born attitudes. Thus, I am against early integrated education." Therefore, it is desirable to conduct comparative studies on the forms of education received by the blind and their empowerment.

9.4.3 *Individual achievement and collective well-being*

This study deals with the interpretation of reality of the blind activists from the onset of blindness to their participation in the self-help movement of the blind. Empowerment here refers to the ability of oneself to perceive

social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. It has not cover the relationship between education and personal achievement. Some blind people who have obtained high social status are not interested in promoting the well-being of the blind as a whole. To analyse the personal achievement of the blind, we may have to redefine empowerment in terms of other elements, say, the achievement motivation.

The questions raised in this section go beyond the scope of this study, but are also important in the understanding of the relationship between education and empowerment of a socially disadvantaged group. We have to wait for further research to give possible answers for these questions.

In this study, I have examined if and how education has empowered the four blind activists. To be an agent of empowerment, school may equip blind students with those alternative skills to function competently in a predominantly sighted world, adjustment of the blind to their blindness, and development of feelings of adequacy and self-confidence. All of these provided direction, opportunities and means for personal advancement. The findings of this study certainly can stimulate further research on the empowerment effect of education on other minority groups. The life experiences of the blind activists would be a testimony to the fact that

blindness may not be a handicap. To produce the hoped-for change, they can think like theorists and act like activists. Equally worthy of mentioning, they must constantly struggle to free their thinking and doing from defeatist perspectives that focused on the limitations arising from blindness. Education is by no means one of the keys to attain this goal.

Appendix - Interview guide

- I. Onset of blindness and pre-school perception of reality
 1. When and how did you become blind?
 2. Describe your immediate reaction to the loss of your eye sight.
 3. Describe the reactions of other people (e.g. parents).
 4. What did you do in your pre-school years?
 5. With whom did you live and play?
 6. What was your parents' expectation on you?
 7. What were the problems encountered by you at that time and how did you cope with them?
- II. Schooling and interpretation of reality
 1. when and how did you start your schooling?
 2. What did you learn?
 3. What did you do after school?
 4. Whom did you meet inside and outside school?
 5. Narrate your relationship with schoolmates.
 6. What and whom did you like at school?
 7. What did you expect to be after schooling?
 8. Were there any problems in learning and in school life and how did you face them?
- III. Post-school life
 1. What did you do after graduation?
 2. What do you think about the life chances of the sighted and the blind?
 3. In your opinion what is blindness? What are the social attitudes towards blindness and the blind?
 4. What are the problems arising from blindness? How could these problems be solved?
 5. Why did you join the self-help organization of the blind?
 6. What did you do in the self-help movement?
 7. Why did you withdraw from the self-help movement?
 8. Describe your family life and present situation?

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